

ENJOYING BOOKS

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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The Secret Fiord

Trumpets in the West

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=

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=

Fortune My Foe:

The Story of Sir Walter Raleigh

=

Tales Out of School



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The cover drawing, by C. F. Tunnicliffe, for the Penguin edition of 'Tarka the Otter,' by Henry Williamson.

THE 'EXCURSIONS' SERIES

FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

*

ENJOYING BOOKS

My original

1924

GEOFFREY TREASE



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LONDON

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Made 1951 in Great Britain

Printed at Prescott by C. Tinling & Co., Limited

for *Phoenix House Limited*, 38 William IV Street,

Charing Cross, London W.C.2

First published 1951

This is one of a series of Excursions books for young people. It has been written to help them find the books they will enjoy. Those volumes already published are *Going to the Cinema*, by Andrew Buchanan, *Going into the Country*, by George Beardmore, *Enjoying Paintings*, by A. C. Ward, *Going to the Theatre*, by John Allen, *Going to the Ballet*, by Arnold Haskell, and *Going to a Concert*, by Lionel Salter.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

GRATEFUL acknowledgments are made to the following for kind permission to quote copyright material from the works named:

Mr W. H. Auden and Messrs Faber and Faber, Ltd, for *Lay your sleeping head . . .*, and Mr Auden, by permission of the G.P.O., for *Night Mail*; Messrs Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd, for the late Sir J. M. Barrie's *Quality Street*; Mr Leslie Barringer for *Joris of the Rock*; Mr Hilaire Belloc and Messrs Methuen and Co., Ltd, for *Hills and the Sea*; Mr Belloc and Messrs A. D. Peters for *On Something*; Miss Moyra Charlton and Messrs Methuen and Co, Ltd, for *Pendellion*; the executrix of the late Mr G. K. Chesterton and Messrs A. P. Watt and Son for *Lepanto*; the executrix and Messrs Methuen and Co, Ltd, for *Alarms and Discursions*; Mr Peter Cheyney and Messrs William Collins, Sons and Co, Ltd, for *Can Ladies Kill?*; Mr David Craigie and Messrs Eyre and Spottiswoode for *The Voyage of the Luna I*; Miss Gordon Daviot and Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, for *Richard of Bordeaux*; Messrs William Heinemann, Ltd, for the late Miss Eleanor Doorly's *The Microbe Man*; Mr T. S. Eliot and Messrs Faber and Faber, Ltd, for *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*; Messrs J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, for J. E. Flecker's *To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence*; Mr Peter Fleming and Messrs Jonathan Cape, Ltd, for *Brazilian Adventure*; Messrs J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, for A. G. Gardiner's *Pebbles on the Shore*; Mr Robert Gibbings and Messrs J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, for *Coming Down the Wye*; Mr A. C. Gissing for *Family Letters of George Gissing*; Miss Rumer Godden and Messrs Michael Joseph, Ltd, for *A Candle for St. Jude*; Mr T. F. Higham and the Clarendon Press for a poem from *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse in English Translation*; Mr C. Walter Hodges and Messrs George Bell and Sons, Ltd, for *Columbus Sails*; The Society of Authors, as literary representative of the late Mr W. W. Jacobs, and Messrs Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd, for *Many Cargoes*; Messrs J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, for J. K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*; Mr F. Kingdon-Ward and Messrs Jonathan Cape, Ltd, for *Burma's Icy Mountains*; Dame Laura Knight, D.B.E., R.A., and Messrs Nicholson and Watson, Ltd, for *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*; Mrs Frieda Lawrence and Messrs William Heinemann, Ltd, for D. H. Lawrence's *Letters*; Miss Lorna Lewis and Messrs William Heinemann, Ltd, for *Marriotts Go North*; Mr Richard Llewellyn and Messrs Michael Joseph, Ltd, for *How Green Was My Valley*; Messrs Methuen and Co, Ltd, for E. V. Lucas's *A Fronded Isle* and Robert Lynd's *The Peal of Bells*; Messrs J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, for Miss Macdonell's Everyman translation of Benvenuto Cellini's *Autobiography*; M. André Maurois and John Lane the Bodley Head, Ltd, for *Ariel*; Mr A. A. Milne and Messrs Methuen and Co, Ltd, for *It's Too*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Late Now; Messrs Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd, for J. Leslie Mitchell's *Hanno, or the Future of Exploration*; John Lane the Bodley Head Ltd, for H. H. Munro's *Collected Short Stories of Saki*; the executors of the late Sir Henry Newbolt and Messrs John Murray for *He Fell Among Thieves* from *Poems New and Old*; Mr Alfred Noyes and Messrs John Murray for *The Highwayman*; the executors of the late Mr John Palmer and Messrs George Bell and Sons, Ltd, for *Molière, His Life and Works*; Mr J. H. B. Peel and Messrs Arthur Barker, Ltd, for *Small Calendars*; Mr Frederic Prokosch and Messrs Chatto and Windus for *Chosen Poems*; Miss V. Sackville-West and Messrs William Heinemann, Ltd, for *The Diary of Lady Anne Clifford*; Messrs John Murray for *Scott's Last Expedition*; Mr J. M. Scott and Messrs Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd, for *Gino Watkins*; Mr R. C. Sheriff and Messrs Victor Gollancz, Ltd, for *Journey's End*; Messrs Chatto and Windus for Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria*; Mrs Aimée Stuart and Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, for P. and A. Stuart's *Nine Till Six*; Mr Sutton Vane and Messrs Samuel French, Ltd, for *Outward Bound*; Miss Elfrida Vipont and the Oxford University Press for *The Lark in the Morn*; the executors of the late Sir Hugh Walpole and Messrs Macmillan and Co, Ltd, for *Fortitude*; the trustees of the Mary Webb Estate and Messrs Jonathan Cape, Ltd, for *Precious Bane*; Messrs J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, for H. G. Wells's *Ann Veronica*.

Also to all those who have kindly permitted reproduction of illustrations (as specified in the captions).

For John, Bob, and Elisabeth

1

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE ?

“MIDNIGHT,” SAID RAOUL of Ger; and when he was belted and cloaked the chaplain led him to a postern in the street wall of the gloomy palace. A gentleman-at-arms saluted; pikemen grounded their butts; Juhel flicked his own cloak round his shoulder in imitation of his master.

Outside was blinding moonlight and rushing wind. At the foot of an ink-black alley lay the darkling sheen of water; beyond were the dim island towers of Sanctalbastre, and beyond again the rock of Ingard, crowned by the great royal castle, loomed sable in cloud-shadow.

“My lord Count,” asked the chaplain, “shall I call the link-men of the household to light you home?”

“I thank you, father—no. I have only to round three sides of Saint Andreas to reach the Burning Bush. It is nearly as plain as daylight.”

A moment later Juhel was trotting behind his lord as the latter strode into the open space before the western end of the cathedral. From a street on their left came voices and a flickering of torchlight; a glance showed Juhel a perspective of shuttered houses, with a tall gateway open at the end of them, and a lit courtyard filled with moving men. By twos and threes the torches passed into the warren of alley-ways; it was Sunday morning, and the guests of the Cardinal Count were leaving the Hôtel d'Estragon.

Raoul of Ger turned away and aimed for the north-western angle of Saint Andreas. Juhel, as he went, picked out the Saint's own image above the doorway. Galilee porch and ranked kings and bishops in their niches, steps where the beggars sat by day, slender western turrets where the pigeons

nested—all these, as moonlight flashed and passed, stood sharply-cut in silver-grey and sable, or blurred and lost in one dark face of stone. Behind the soaring bulk of the great central tower dim masses of grey cloud went scudding; the plane-trees and chestnut-trees that lined two sides of the square kept up a constant hiss and roar, shifting and tossing their dark foliage against frowning stillness of blank-windowed palaces behind them. . . .

Count Raoul and Juhel passed the base of the north-western tower; the boy glanced up at the buttressed bulk of the north nave aisle. The roof was invisible now, and only a line of crocketed finials cut into the stormy sky.

“Like a great ship riding at anchor,” thought Juhel, “only safer, and kindlier, and more blessed, and very still.”

He glanced across the windy square to taste the contrast of the raging trees, and suddenly caught his breath. Then he reached out and tugged at the Count’s flying cloak.

“My lord,” he muttered, “my lord! We are followed!”

The count spun round.

“Where? By whom?”

“Two men, among the trees. They are still now. One, two, three trees to the left of the turret with the shining vane.”

“Over many people about for cut-purse dealings,” commented the Count. “See, torches all over the square behind.”

“They have no torches,” whispered Juhel, wishing he carried a dagger.

“Come along, boy, we are only five minutes from the inn.”

The Count’s voice was amused, but he quickened his stride. Ahead was a dark entry, leading through the buildings of the choristers’ school into the open space behind the cathedral apse. From that passage branched a narrower alley, which skirted the flank of the Hôtel de Hastain and led into the same open space a score of paces to the left of the other. Gaining the mouth of the entry, the Count paused; straight ahead of him stretched the dark passage, with a wooden post at the far end to restrict its use to foot-passengers. Beyond the post were cobbles, wall-shadowed, tree-shadowed, and at length brightly moonlit, running to a gutter and a sheer

house-wall; and as Raoul of Ger stepped forward an owl's cry, thrice repeated, rang from among the trees behind.

Juhel gasped. Along the branching alley something creaked. The mystified Count ripped out his sword and advanced up the passage to the alley-mouth, with his page shivering in rear.

Darkness and emptiness in the alley; only the rushing of wind in leaves to be heard. The Count's left hand came groping backwards, to find a hot clutching paw; the Count trotted down the covered way, dragging the scuttling Juhel behind him.

In a flash they were clear of the building; a deep-toned *twang* resounded from their left, and something whizzed to thud into wood behind them. Over his shoulder Juhel saw a swinging first-floor shutter in the building beside the mouth of the alley; then he was hauled past the low wall of the choristers' playground and flung into the black shadow of a buttress of the cathedral apse.

The Count knelt to peer round the arris, and a man broke, sword in hand, out of the passage-way, shouting something unintelligible toward the window beyond him.

"Behind the buttress!" cried an answering voice.

The man turned; then, at a clash of steel in the passage, turned again.

"Oh God!" he squeaked, and ran like a rabbit across the moonlit space to disappear in the mean streets beyond the angle of the Hôtel de Hastain.'

Half Enjoying and Really Enjoying

That comes from Leslie Barringer's *Joris of the Rock*. If, after reading those few pages, you are not interested in hearing any more, the author has failed in his purpose—so far as you, personally, are concerned. No man can please everybody.

But suppose you *are* interested? I was, when I first read it. Why?

It may seem a curious question. People seldom ask you why you enjoy strawberries and cream. You do and that is about

all you can say. You enjoy them without needing to think about them. If you read up the whole history of the strawberry and the science of its culture, if you studied dairy-farming and milked the cow yourself, the dishful of fruit and cream would not taste any better.

It is different with some things.

An American can seldom enjoy an English cricket-match, because he does not know the rules. To him, it is a painfully slow proceeding, with white figures standing, crouching—and just occasionally moving—in a green field. He cannot appreciate the drama of a dropped catch; the craftsmanship of the batsman's stroke; the suspense when the lengthening shadows threaten to rob one side of a well-deserved victory.

The Englishman misses the enjoyment of a baseball game in exactly the same way. Boys see no pleasure in some things—a mannequin parade for example—which delight their sisters.

There are other things which can be *half* enjoyed without much effort. Many girls like the excitement of a rugger match though they don't know all the rules. One can be stirred by great music without knowing the structure of a symphony and by a picture without any knowledge of painting. But all these things can be enjoyed much more, if we learn something about them.

It is easy to see that—in the case of music, art, and even sport. For some reason many people leave out books. 'I learned to read when I was a small child,' they say. 'What more is there to learn?' Or, with a suspicious look: 'Do you mean "Literature"? No, thanks, we do that at school. Oh, it's all *right*, but we don't feel like any more just now.'

This book is nothing to do with school. It is concerned not with books to be studied for examinations, but with books to be enjoyed. It has only one object: to help you in finding more books that you will like, and in getting still more pleasure out of them. And now let us get back to Count Raoul and his page in the dark alley beside the cathedral at Hautarroy.

Why 'Read On' ?

Why does one ever want to read more of a story? There are two common reasons. Either it is exciting and we want to see what happens next; or we are already interested in the characters, we like their company, and we want to stay with them, whether anything dramatic is happening or not.

Which reason applies here? Until we read more we know nothing about the characters. But, whoever they are, they are in a dangerous situation and we wonder whether they will reach their inn alive.

Many novelists have used this sort of situation—dark alleys, flitting shadows, mysterious owl-hoots, swords in the moonlight. Unless an author can use it well, he should avoid it. Has Leslie Barringer used it skilfully enough to justify it?

I think so. I did not yawn when I read about the owl-hoot. My interest quickened. Something was obviously going to happen—but what? I was still wondering, a page later. The extract has one important literary quality which we should look for in every exciting story—*Suspense*.

The other chief quality I find there is *Atmosphere*. I feel a vivid sense of being there. The author has made me see that moonlit town and hear the noise made by the tossing trees. I can easily think myself inside Juhel's cloak—no, more than that, inside the boy's skin. I can almost feel it prickle as that creepy dark passage opens ahead, and has just *got* to be walked through, if we are to get home to bed. We have all had that feeling at some time in our lives. Leslie Barringer must have had it himself and he depends upon our having had it, so that our imagination will co-operate with his. But neither author nor reader has ever been a medieval boy in that situation. That is where the author, making a greater imaginative effort, visualizing the whole scene in detail, translating it into skilfully-chosen words which we might never think of, is able to put out a helping hand and pull us after him into the exciting world of Hautarroy.

'I can't *bear* long descriptions,' somebody remarks. 'That's why I don't like historical novels.'

It is quite true (and a great pity) that many boys and girls

are put off historical novels by their long-winded descriptions. This form of literature was invented by Sir Walter Scott in an age when people, having no radio, television, cinema, or car, liked their novels to last through as many long evenings as possible. Scott started a fashion, and even to-day some historical writers seem to feel that they should be heavier and grander in style than other authors. Nor do they gain in popularity if they are rammed down our throats at school. As a schoolgirl, Gillian Hansard, wrote some years ago: 'Though the details of Scott's novels are not always correct they give one a very good idea of the period and though they are rather painful to read they always give benefit.' She makes them sound rather like medicine. If you feel like that about Scott (it is only fair to say that some boys and girls get immense pleasure from him), leave his books alone at present unless you have to study them at school.

How does Leslie Barringer take us into Hautarroy without boring us by long descriptions?

First, of course, by that quality of suspense, like a carrot dangled before the donkey's nose, he promises us that if we are patient for a little longer something exciting will happen.

Secondly, the paragraphs of necessary description are broken up by dialogue. Not much, just a terse phrase or two. We no more want the characters to start a long conversation than we want to linger over a guide-book description of the cathedral architecture. There is no waste of words. It is what the critics call '*economical* dialogue'.

Thirdly, since we must have *some* description (how else can we picture an imaginary city?), this too has been done as economically as possible. The author (I should guess) has worked out every detail in his own mind, clearly and precisely. He is not content with a vague notion that the square is lined with trees. He knows what kind of trees. You cannot really *see* a tree in your mind's eye until you have decided whether it is a poplar or a chestnut. He has seen this and a hundred other details, but he has not bored us by *telling* us them all. He has selected just those which most help to build

up the impression—those which mean something. What we call, in judging a book, the 'significant detail'.

What he has seen he has put into words, carefully chosen and arranged. A few of those words are unusual: 'crocketed finials', 'arris', 'link-men'. . . . Does that matter? We can go to the dictionary if we like—always a good habit—but for the moment we are too interested in the story. Too many strange words would make the book hard to read and meaningless. Slipped in just here and there, they add richness. You cannot make a plum-pudding of fruit and spice alone. There must be plainer ingredients to hold it together and make it digestible.

Leslie Barringer has mixed the fancy and the plain effectively. He could have written simply that the lake was at the end of the alley and that the rock was shadowed by a cloud; to make the scene vivid, however, he wrote 'the darkling sheen of water' and 'sable in cloud-shadow'. If he had overdone that sort of thing, the story would have become altogether too romantic and unreal. So he brings us back to simple everyday words with the 'hot clutching paw' of the 'scuttling' page.

He has tried, too, to avoid obvious words which have been used so often that their meaning has worn thin. The trees do not rustle or murmur in the wind, they 'hiss and roar'. Think of a night when you have heard a strong wind rubbing the tree-tops together—are not his less usual verbs a fair description? If the Count merely 'drew' his sword, it would be tame. If he 'whipped' it out, it would sound a little more exciting, but not much, because to 'whip' (in this sense) has been overdone—men even speak of whipping out their cheque-books. So the Count 'ripped' out his sword. The word contains the double idea of suddenness and sharpness. Its very sound suggests quick, violent action as the blade comes out of the scabbard.

Once chosen, the words are well arranged. 'Along the branching alley something creaked'. Inversion—turning the sentence back to front—can be a tiresome trick if used too often or without reason. Here it increases our suspense. If the sentence begins, 'something creaked', there is no suspense.

But the author pays out the sentence like a rope, word by word. 'Along the branching alley . . .' (Well, what?) . . . 'something' . . . (Yes, *do* go on!) . . . 'creaked'. Of course we read the sentence so quickly that we take in the whole sense in a moment and do not realize that the word-order has made a tiny extra contribution to the excitement. But it has, just as another literary trick is going to do in the next paragraph: 'Darkness and emptiness in the alley;' no verb. When you stand like that, sword in hand, your racing brain does not stop to put your thoughts into perfect grammar. Missing out verbs is a monotonous mannerism of some writers, but occasionally it is effective. 'The alley was dark and empty'? Not so good, we may feel.

These are some of the points which make this extract about as good a piece of writing as you will meet in a romantic historical novel. 'But', someone complains, 'I should never have noticed half if you hadn't mentioned them. Of course, now I come to think——'

Exactly. You can enjoy an exciting story without knowing in the least how it has been put together. But when you do 'come to think' about it, there is an extra enjoyment added to the first. The more practice you have, the more that extra enjoyment mixes up with the first, so that you get it all at the same time. Then, as you read a novel like this, you get not merely the excitement of the plot but (without any conscious extra effort) the enjoyment of the skill with which it is told.

Once you have learnt to do that it is something which, like cycling and swimming, you will never forget. Even the learning, unless you are one of those whom it hurts to think at all, can be enjoyable in itself. At least there is nothing for you to fall off, and no salt-water to go up your nose.

Finding a Book You'll Like

How do *you* choose the books you read?

By the author? But have you enough 'favourite authors' to supply all your needs? And if you stuck to *their* books, how would you ever discover all the other good ones? Remember

too that even a favourite author sometimes writes a disappointing book. Each should be judged on its merits.

We chose our books in many ways. We are caught by a colourful dust-jacket and a cunningly-written 'blurb'—the publisher's glowing description on the flap of the paper jacket. In a library, our interest must be seized by the title on the 'spine' of the book—that is, the narrow surface of the cloth binding, which looks outwards from the shelf. The younger the prospective reader, the more he will go for the title. If a girl wants a school-story she may be more attracted to one called, say, *Mystery at St. Millicent's* than to *The Lark in the Morn*, though the first title is one I have just invented and belongs (I hope) to no real book, whereas *The Lark in the Morn*, by Elfrida Vipont, is one of the finest girls' school stories written in recent years. The title, though most appropriate *when* you have read the book, is of no help to a girl scanning the shelves in a hurry. This does not mean that the author should have labelled her book with some cheap, obvious title to show that it was a school-story—one shudders to think that the book might have been called *The Lark in the Dorm!*—but to point out that titles are uncertain things to go by.

Once we have taken a book in our hands we are influenced by chapter-headings (often untrustworthy guides), by pictures (if any), and by odd sentences which leap to our eyes. From these we get an idea of what the book is *about*. We see that A. Stephen Tring's *The Old Gang* is not a crime story but an amusing, true-to-life novel of a modern grammar school, that Lorna Lewis's *Marriotts Go North* is about a Scottish holiday, not an Arctic expedition, and that George Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* is not an enthralling novel of secret documents and blackmail but a quiet, beautiful little book about an author in a Devon cottage.

The subject of a story is highly important. We hear people saying in the library: 'He likes a good Wild West, or a mystery. . . .' Or: 'No, I don't think I should care for that. I don't like tales about foreign parts. . . .' And again: 'This one all happens behind the scenes in a theatre—I love back-stage

stories, don't you?' Or: 'I want a book for my daughter—*ponies*—if there's one she hasn't had. . . .'

If you choose books because you like the subject and setting it is quite reasonable, up to a point, but you run two risks. First, you may get into a groove and miss other good books because they are not your usual type. Secondly, you may land yourself with a book which is foolish in plot and slipshod in style. I know, because I have my own preferences—I like stories of stage-life and of murders committed in schools and universities. Such novels have to be very badly written for me not to enjoy them. But, alas, many are, and my hopes of a happy evening by the fire vanish, and the unfinished book goes back to the library the next morning.

Obviously, there is a great deal more to a story than its theme and setting. Is there any other quick guide?

Often we can learn something from the opening paragraphs.

What Does the First Page Tell You?

Modern authors, well aware how hard it is for us to choose from so many books, try to help us to find the ones they think we shall enjoy most; which are, curiously enough, their own.

Having thought of titles and chapter-headings to allure us, they write an opening designed to conquer us completely. Something which will grip our attention and set the keynote of the whole book. Look at this one:

I am standin' lookin' at this house and I think that if ever I get any dough I will settle down an' get myself a dump like this.

Because it has got what they call atmosphere. It is standin' back off the roadway on the side of a little green slope. There is a white thicket fence separatin' it from the road an' there are flower beds and ornamental bits edged out with white stones all over the place . . .

Me—I reckon I would like a rest. Travellin' by airplane is all very well but it sorta gets you tired. But then I've found that anythin' gets me tired. Even G-men get tired, but maybe they told you about that.

We can tell a good deal about the book from that opening. Possibly we can guess the author. Compare it with another, also in first-person narrative:

I always think the bath is an awfully good place to face one's problems in, don't you?

There's something so soothing about hot water, and seeing how different one's toes look above water from what they do below—when they suddenly go quite square—and trickling one's sponge vaguely up and down to create a sort of waterfall effect all over one. And you are fairly free from interruption—no parents suggesting that you might help with the washing-up . . . no brothers wanting advice on how to seem glamorous to a girl friend on an income of about one-and-six. . . . Yes—a bath has its points as a thinking place, especially if you can find up a bit of chocolate or sweet to chew in it.

The problems that I, Marigold Marriott, faced on the evening when this story begins divided into long-term and short-term.

Need we say which of these quotations comes from the Lorna Lewis story already mentioned and which from *Can Ladies Kill?* by Peter Cheyney? They are alike only in one detail: neither character talks ordinary literary English. But they do not talk alike. We can choose at once whether we prefer to spend the next two hours with Mr Cheyney's G-man, or with Miss Lewis's slangy seventeen-year-old. A quick glance through confirms that each book keeps up the same style throughout as its opening page, so we can tell at once whether we shall be interested or irritated.

Not all openings tell us so much. Listen to this dialogue—a lively dialogue-opening is a recognized way of catching the reader's attention:

'Kit! Kit! Where are you, you impossible child?'

'Here.'

'Where?'

'Bedroom.'

'What are you doing?'

'Reading.'

'Have you done your homework and your practising?'

'Need I do any mouldy practising? . . .'

This opening shows that Miss Vipont can write good dialogue without wasting a word, and that her ear is sharp to catch the kind of talk which flies between a girl upstairs and a grown-up below. But a book might start like that and be nothing more than clever, whereas *The Lark in the Morn* soars higher than mere cleverness.

Another good way to open is to suggest that something is

happening or about to happen. H. G. Wells did this in *Ann Veronica*. The very first sentence sounds the keynote of the whole book:

One Wednesday afternoon in late September Ann Veronica Stanley came down from London in a state of solemn excitement and quite resolved to have things out with her father that very evening.

What things? With a row in prospect, we are curious enough to read on. Wells keeps us guessing for a while, but we do not mind because we are learning more about Ann, her home, and a vague 'no-hatted, blond young man in grey flannels' named Teddy, who was lurking by the pillar-box as she came out of the station and, on seeing her, 'became rigid and a singularly bright shade of pink'.

The story of *Ann Veronica* is one of revolt—not only against the interference of an old-fashioned father who persists in treating her as a child, and against the dullness of her London suburb, but against the whole world of 1909 (when the book was written), a world in which women had no votes and girls had few chances of a career. Things have changed since then. The story no longer shocks parents or is denounced from Church pulpits as it was when it came out. Some of Ann Veronica's ideas have conquered the world: others no longer seem as obviously right as they did to the young men and women who rejoiced over the book when it was new. Ann Veronica is not a heroine to be blindly imitated. But she is a delightful character, lovable even when she is making a fool of herself—and who can fail to sympathize with her in those opening pages when she surveys her home-surroundings and steels herself to do battle with her father?

'It's either now or never,' said Ann Veronica again, ascending this stile. 'Much as I hate rows. I've either got to make a stand or give in altogether.'

She seated herself in a loose and easy attitude and surveyed the backs of the Avenue houses; then her eyes wandered to where the new red-and-white villas peeped among the trees. She seemed to be making some sort of inventory. 'Ye gods!' she said at last. '*What a place!*'

'Stuffy isn't the word for it.'

'I wonder what he takes me for?'

This opening scene is excellent. It gives the keynote—revolt—in the first sentence. It introduces the main character, shows us what she is like, and promises swift action, a promise which is soon fulfilled. Thus we get a fair idea of whether it is likely to be a novel we shall enjoy.

It would be misleading, though, to judge the older classics by their first pages. Often the modern reader is put off by an historical novel which starts like this:

Seldom had the interior of this island presented a more peaceful and prosperous aspect than in the reign of Edward III, when the more turbulent spirits among his subjects had found occupation in his foreign wars, and his wise government had established at home a degree of plenty, tranquillity, and security, such as had probably never before been experienced in England.

Castle and cottage, church and convent, alike showed the prosperity and safety of the inhabitants, at once by the profuseness of embellishment. . . .

Yet that extract is from Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Lances of Lynwood*, popular with several generations of readers since 1855 and still enjoyed by many who have the patience to plough through those opening paragraphs to the battles and sieges beyond. In Miss Yonge's day, as we have seen, readers had more time on their hands and authors had no need to dash straight into their stories with dialogue or exciting action. This does not mean that we may not still find great enjoyment in old books, but that, in our search for it, we must be prepared to dig deeper still.

2

IS IT WORTH READING ?

MOST OF US, when younger, liked 'comics'. Perhaps some of us still do? Any one who has lived in a barrack-room with soldiers knows that some men, even, never develop a taste for anything else.

Some parents and teachers laugh at these papers, some disapprove furiously and ban them, others do not interfere but are quietly worried and disappointed. What is the right attitude?

The first thing to remember is that we all have different moods, and in those moods, according to whether we feel tired, unwell, depressed, or full of life and mental energy, we turn to the kind of literature which meets our need. A Professor of English may not feel like poetry at breakfast: he reaches for the newspaper. At bedtime, after a day's lecturing and other intellectual employment, he may enjoy a well-written detective-story by Dorothy Sayers. So with us. There are times (obviously, since you are reading these lines) when you, for instance, like to try a non-fiction book, and no doubt there are others when you prefer a classic, or a thriller, or just the snippety stuff to be found in a 'digest' or a magazine. It is not reading comics which matters, it is reading nothing else.

The second point is age. A boy of eight whose favourite reading is comics should not seriously worry anybody: a boy of eighteen who still prefers them to anything else is different. His education has been a partial failure. If we are to grow into civilized cultured persons, books are something we need. Somehow, during the years at school, we must develop our taste from the comic to the classic, taking in all the stages

between. This does *not* mean that we end up on a lonely pedestal as 'highbrows', looking down on everything but Literature with a capital L. But we should gradually have extended our tastes until we can genuinely enjoy many types of books according to our mood.

Let us admit that we shall lose some pleasure as we go, but we shall gain on balance. As our taste develops we may find it hard to enjoy the out-and-out 'tripe' we once devoured. Supermen heroes and sinister villains, whose fights used to thrill us to the marrow, may now make us hoot with critical laughter. Bad English we used not to notice may now strike us as painful. Even when tired or unwell, we shall expect certain standards in our lightest reading. Well, there is no lack of books to meet our need. There are detective stories, humorous books, adventures and romances, in which good English, ingenious ideas, and natural characters are combined. If these now form the lighter element in our reading and we no longer have the old zest for 'blood-and-thunder', have we lost anything on the exchange?

'Just a moment', you may say. 'There are books on the library shelves which are no better quality than the cheap magazines—they are just the same tripe, only printed and bound differently.' True enough. Though librarians try hard to choose the best books they also have to get what borrowers demand. As we saw in the last chapter, we cannot always tell a good book at a glance. So the time has come, as we said, to dig deeper.

The Ladder from Comic to Classic

One of the most popular themes in the comic is the journey to the planets. If we look at this theme, treated at various literary levels, we can very soon see the difference between the first-rate writer and the fourth-rate, and some of the grades between.

In one weekly before me the story, *Space Rovers*, is told in strips of pictures with two lines of print under each. The boy, setting out with his father in a space-ship, promises: 'I'll try and bring you something beautiful from Venus, Sis!' We need

not quibble over the poor English, 'try and' instead of 'try to'; the real weakness of this remark is the pitifully poor imagination it reveals. It reduces an inter-planetary journey, the supreme physical adventure conceivable in our century, to the scale of a day-outing to Margate. We almost expect to see the boy returning with a hideous vase inscribed 'A Present from Venus'. The whole story is equally feeble and written in slipshod English.

Turn from this to *The Voyage of the Luna I* by David Craigie. Here there is fantasy, admittedly: any story of a trip to the Moon must, in our present state of inexperience, sound far-fetched. But the tremendous scientific adventure of it all is made clear to the reader. We can believe in the boy and girl characters and in the over-mastering impulse which drove them (born as they were of an exploring family) to stow away in the rocket. The story is exciting, the English has vigour and style. Here is young Martin, facing the probability of death by burning alive as the Moon revolves into the full heat of the Sun, yet enough of a scientist to think of the work unfinished:

The sun creeping up behind the mountain ranges facing him made the hope of survival seem small. But his heart went out to this land of ash and lava, strange insects and reptiles that hid themselves underground and in dark places. He longed to return one day—and not with a packet of envelopes and a home-made telescope.

This book is not merely far in advance of the story in the comic. It is also, though a children's book, much less childish than the supposedly adult novels which Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of Tarzan, wrote about Mars. *Luna I* ranks in quality as a worthy young brother to Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* and H. G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*.

These stories, all owing something to Verne's original fantasy, form a ladder of taste, leading up from the comic to one of the greatest modern English writers, a ladder which it is worth our while to climb.

How Many 'Marks' Should the Author Get?

Literary critics have never united (as dog-breeders and other experts do) to work out a marking system, so that books may be 'placed' in order of merit. One critic will hail a novel as a masterpiece, another will dismiss it as second-rate. No art can ever be measured by exact tests, so there will always be argument. How dull it would be if every book bore a mark of guaranteed quality! We can imagine angry parents saying: 'Why do you waste your time on an author who never gets more than thirty out of a hundred?' and priggish persons declaring: 'I *never* read anything less than A minus.' Prices might be raised accordingly.

We must form our own opinions, getting such help as we can from critics and friends, but in the end making up our own minds. Though we have no exact marking system we can follow, there are about half a dozen main points we can look out for. My own list (there is no official list) would include the basic idea of the book; its development and construction, including its opening and climax, and all the incidents and situations between; the characterization; the setting and atmosphere; and the style. Before we look at each in turn, observe that every one of these things except the last can exist, either in the author's mind or in his rough note-book, before a word of the actual novel is written. The other general thing to remember is that a first-class book need not score highly on all these points—there are acknowledged masterpieces which (if this were an examination paper) would score about two out of twenty on some of the separate questions. If we are to enjoy books we must look for their strong qualities, not only their weaknesses. It is partly because some critics do this, and others do not, that their reviews of the same book contradict each other.

The Idea and What Happens to it

First, now, the basic idea. What started the author on this particular book? If he was a popular writer of 'mysteries', it may be just that he suddenly thought of a new and ingenious method of murder, or an apparently water-tight alibi. Jules

Verne's ideas sprang from scientific possibilities—he foresaw the submarine and many other inventions long before they materialized. In *Ann Veronica* H. G. Wells wished to show the battle of the educated, decent girl at the beginning of the twentieth century to win the freedom girls now enjoy. In *Fortitude* Hugh Walpole puts the basic idea in the first line: ' 'Tisn't life that matters! 'Tis the courage you bring to it.' The rest of the book is the illustration and reinforcement of that message. A novel can be based on almost anything—an ingenious trick of plot, an original situation, an unusual aspect of life, a character, a scrap of history, a moral message. All we should ask is this: is it a *good* idea?

Next, the plot—the development of this idea in a planned sequence of incidents and situations leading from one to another, and finally to a satisfying climax, with an opening which strikes the right note. Walpole does this skilfully in *Fortitude*. He opens with his hero, Peter Westcott, a twelve-year-old boy, hearing an old man in a Cornish inn, speaking those words, ' 'Tisn't life that matters. . . .' The novel is in four sections, *Scaw House* (Peter's grim childhood, and his adventures at boarding school), *The Bookshop* (where he runs away to London and works in a mysterious second-hand book-shop), *The Roundabout* (where he wins fame as a novelist, marries, and seems to have the world at his feet), and, finally, *Scaw House* again, when a combination of bad luck and his own faults strips him of everything he has won, and we leave him, on a Cornish cliff, facing a fresh start.

Peter, clinging to the Giant's Finger, staggered in the wind. The world was now hidden in a mist of rain. He was alone—and he was happy, happy, as he had never known happiness, in any time, before.

The rain lashed his face and his body. His clothes clung heavily about him.

He answered the storm——

'Make of me a man—to be afraid of nothing . . . to be ready for everything—Love, friendship, success . . . to take them if they come . . . to care nothing if these things are not for me——'

'Make me brave! Make me brave!'

He fancied that once more against the wall of sea-mist he saw tremen-

dous, victorious, the Rider on the Lion. But now, for the first time, the Rider's face was turned towards him——

And Behold—he was the Rider!

Not an episode in this novel is wasted. Step by step it moves on from significant opening to destined climax. Contrast with it another well-known book in which there is almost no construction, Jerome K. Jerome's tale of a camping trip on the Thames, *Three Men in a Boat*. When they got to Hampton Court:

Harris asked me if I'd ever been in the maze at Hampton Court. He said he went in once to show somebody else the way. He had studied it up in a map, and it was so simple that it seemed foolish—hardly worth the twopence charged for admission. Harris said he thought that map must have been got up as a practical joke, because it wasn't a bit like the real thing, and only misleading. It was a country cousin that Harris took in. He said:

'We'll just go in here, so that you can say you've been, but it's very simple. It's absurd to call it a maze. You keep on taking the first turning to the right. We'll just walk round for ten minutes, and then go and get some lunch.'

They met some people soon after they had got inside, who said they had been there for threequarters of an hour, and had had about enough of it. Harris told them they could follow him if they liked; he was just going in, and then should turn round and come out again. They said it was very kind of him, and fell behind, and followed.

They picked up various other people who wanted to get it over, as they went along, until they had absorbed all the persons in the maze. People who had given up all hopes of ever getting either in or out, or of ever seeing their home and friends again, plucked up courage, at the sight of Harris and his party, and joined the procession, blessing him. Harris said he should judge there must have been twenty people following him, in all; and one woman with a baby, who had been there all morning, insisted on taking his arm, for fear of losing him.

Harris kept on turning to the right, but it seemed a long way, and his cousin said he supposed it was a very big maze.

'Oh, one of the largest in Europe,' said Harris.

'Yes, it must be,' replied the cousin, because we've walked a good two miles already.'

Harris began to think it rather strange himself, but he held on until, at last, they passed the half of a penny bun on the ground that Harris's cousin swore he had noticed there seven minutes ago. Harris said: 'Oh, impossible!' but the woman with the baby said, 'Not at all,' as she herself had taken it from the child, and thrown it down there, just before she

met Harris. She also added that she wished she had never seen Harris, and expressed an opinion that he was an impostor. That made Harris mad, and he produced his map, and explained his theory.

'The map may be all right enough,' said one of the party, 'if you know whereabouts in it we are now.'

Harris didn't know, and suggested that the best thing to do would be to go back to the entrance, and begin again. For the beginning again part of it there was not much enthusiasm; but with regard to the advisability of going back to the entrance there was complete unanimity, and so they turned, and trailed after Harris again, in the opposite direction. About ten minutes more passed, and then they found themselves in the centre.

Harris thought at first of pretending that that was what he had been aiming at; but the crowd looked dangerous, and he decided to treat it as an accident.

Anyhow, they had got something to start from then. They did know where they were, and the map was once more consulted, and the thing seemed simpler than ever, and off they started for the third time.

And three minutes later they were back in the centre again.

After that they simply couldn't get anywhere else. Whatever way they turned brought them back to the middle. It became so regular at length, that some of the people stopped there, and waited for the others to take a walk round, and come back to them. Harris drew out his map again, after a while, but the sight of it only infuriated the mob, and they told him to go and curl his hair with it. Harris said that he couldn't help feeling that, to a certain extent, he had become unpopular.

They all got crazy at last, and sang out for the keeper, and the man came and climbed up the ladder outside, and shouted out directions to them. But all their heads were, by this time, in such a confused whirl that they were incapable of grasping anything, and so the man told them to stop where they were, and he would come to them. They huddled together, and waited; and he climbed down, and came in.

He was a young keeper, as luck would have it, and new to the business; and when he got in, he couldn't get to them, and then *he* got lost. They caught sight of him every now and then, rushing about the other side of the hedge, and he would see them, and rush to get to them, and they would wait there for about five minutes, and he would reappear again in exactly the same spot, and ask them where they had been.

They had to wait until one of the old keepers came back from his dinner before they got out.

I have interrupted our argument with this long extract for two very good reasons. One, if any reader has so far missed Jerome's book, he ought to know *what* he is missing before he grows any older. And two, *Three Men in a Boat* proves that if a work has other qualities, weak construction will not prevent

its success. Jerome should not have broken into his main story with long anecdotes which are really short stories in themselves, but it is these delirious episodes which have made the book a classic of humour; while the serious descriptions of scenery and the author's reflections (which *he* regarded as the essential part of the book) are the very passages we may feel inclined to skip.

Let us enjoy good construction when we meet it, but forgive its absence if the book has other merits. They say that Tolstoy lost his way in writing *War and Peace*, yet what a book resulted!

Characters—Flat or Round?

Whether a first-class novel of *any* kind can do without first-class characters is much more doubtful.

What makes us look for sequels to a book, or read the book itself again and again? Above all else, the characters. We hear young people at the library asking for another 'Biggles' or a 'William' story, and grown-ups looking back on the books they used to enjoy, will recall characters vividly though they may be hazy if questioned on the plot. Sherlock Holmes, Doctor Watson, and the villainous Moriarty; Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn; P. G. Wodehouse's idiotic Bertie Wooster and the dignified man-servant Jeeves; Allan Quatermain the hunter and the others in *King Solomon's Mines*—Captain Good, R.N., monocled but trouserless, Umslopagaas the Zulu, and the hideous witch Gagool; Chesterton's tubby little priest-detective, Father Brown, and Dorothy Sayer's aristocratic Peter Wimsey; John Buchan's Major Hannay, the Secret Service agent; Conan Doyle's well-contrasted rival professors in *The Lost World*; that wonderful mixed bag of characters in J. B. Priestley's *Good Companions*. It is the same when we turn to the classics, to Pickwick and Becky Sharp, Heathcliff and Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

These people are presented in various ways. There is the old Dickensian method of straightforward description, where the story is held up for a paragraph or so to paint a full-length word-picture of the new character. Modern practice

is against such a frontal attack. The novelist prefers to reveal the character by degrees, letting out a hint here and there, indirectly, so that what the old-fashioned writer packed into half a page, giving us the past history and present appearance combined, his modern successor will distribute, a phrase here and a phrase there, over several pages or even chapters. To invent a simple example: the nineteenth-century novelist said a girl had golden hair, but the modern writer will convey the fact either incidentally, 'letting her fair hair tumble forward into the wash-basin', or through the heroine's own thoughts: 'The trouble was, she reflected, the cats at the office would never believe such hair was natural—they'd say she bleached it, and they'd always be spying for that tell-tale darkening at the roots': or through dialogue, quoting some remark passed by one of those same 'cats'.

Dialogue is, in itself, one of the subtlest ways of conveying character. In a story of poor quality it may be impossible to guess, from isolated remarks, who is speaking. The writer knows just enough to indicate an uneducated person or a foreigner—but he imagines that this can be done just by the droppings of aitches, writing 'ze' for 'the' and crude little tricks like that. The depiction of character through dialogue, making every person speak in a subtly distinctive way and ensuring that almost every line of conversation, except the purely conventional 'thank you's' and 'good morning's', can be instantly identified as coming from one character and one character only—this calls for long and careful observation in everyday life, and for a very high degree of literary skill. It is a joy to recognize it when it exists. In Rumer Godden's delightful novel of a ballet-company, *A Candle for St. Jude*, every character speaks with an unmistakable voice of his or her own, from the child-dancer Lollie to the wilful, temperamental Madame and her practical sister-in-law Ilse:

'I like life whole, in the rround,' said Madame. 'I . . . welcome it. Oll! I don't want to, how do you say, *dodge* any of it. I think that is important.'

'Then why are you always grumbling?' asked Miss Ilse.

'My grumbling is part of the whole,' said Madame haughtily. 'Besides, I don't agree. I don't grumble.'

'But you do, Anna. You grumble at everything: at the east wind, at the soup, at your time-table, at your exercises, at the children.'

'Then I have to. To balance what I love. I love so many things.'

'What things?' asked Miss Ilse suspiciously.

'Universal things,' said Madame dreamily. 'You would not understand, but I shall explain to you. . . .'

Critics speak sometimes of 'flat' characters and of those who 'fail to develop'. A flat character is one about whom the author has not troubled to think enough. He wants a sinister villain, a gay young hero, or a mischievous heroine. He decides what the character looks like, attaches the qualities required by the plot—cruelty, courage, quick temper—adds one or two conspicuous attributes such as a hollow chuckle or flaming red hair, and imagines that he has created a character.

In reality he has hardly begun. Such a character is flat as cardboard, fit to be looked at only from one side. A 'rounded' character stands examination from any angle. The villain would not in real life be sinister to everybody. Villainy is not a wholetime occupation. Many a cold-blooded murderer has been a devoted husband, kind to animals, or (in the eyes of his acquaintances) 'a thorough sport'. And many a pretty girl who is a heroine to her young man is also a brainless idiot to her employer, a worry to her parents, and a melancholy memory to her late headmistress. The truly living characters of fiction should be so real to us that we can change our viewpoint and see them just as clearly, though not quite the same.

So, too, with 'development'. Whether the novel is spread over years or, like some, over the momentous happenings of a single day, it should not leave the characters as it found them. If their experiences have not changed them at all, if they have learnt nothing whatever from the events in the story, then either nothing of significance has happened—or they have been too self-centred and insensitive to be affected.

We can all think of popular books, and series of books, in which the same characters go on and on, never getting any

older either in years or in experience, however many fantastic adventures they have. If we compare these with other novels, in which well-rounded characters, each with a share of virtues and vices, none of them all black or all white, move steadily forward and are transformed by what happens to them, we shall find that characterization is one of the surest tests of quality.

Seeing and Feeling Characters and Places

We must be able to see not only the characters but the background against which they move, the Setting. Some writers keep much the same setting for all their books. Thomas Hardy will for ever be associated with Dorset, Francis Brett Young writes mainly of Worcestershire and the Welsh Border, Hugh Walpole's later novels were all laid in Cumberland, and Mary Webb wrote entirely of her native Shropshire. In *Precious Bane*, writing as a country girl of the Napoleonic period, she creates a little world of her own round two lakes in that hilly landscape:

Every way you looked, there was nought but gold, saving towards Sarn, where the woods began, and the great stretch of grey water, gleaming and wincing in the sun . . . I can see it all in clear colours, with Plash lying under the sunset, beyond the woods, looking like a jagged piece of bottle glass.

Other writers—especially adventure-story writers who range the world for their plots—may use a different setting for every book, laying their stories in countries they have never visited. This does not necessarily mean that the setting of the book is not vivid and convincing. It is amazing what a practised writer can do, using photographs, maps, and travel-books. With his imaginative eye he can sometimes, after an hour's study, see a far-off country as clearly as some people who have been there. But can he feel it? Can he convey not only the Setting but the Atmosphere?

It is not always easy to separate these two ingredients. It may help if we think of a setting as a cunningly-painted back-cloth against which the actors in the story move, while

we, the readers, are conscious of still being in the theatre, on the other side of the footlights. When the book has a convincing atmosphere as well, it means that without noticing it we have passed across the footlights—that, indeed, there *were* no footlights and it is *not* painted scenery, but a real world in which we ourselves are living, closely identified with the characters.

A setting, however beautiful, is like a photograph: it is the scene as it looks to everyone at a given moment. Atmosphere is that same place and moment in time as *felt* by the characters present: it varies with the individual viewpoint, as does the same subject painted by half a dozen artists sitting in a semicircle. A book like Jules Verne's *Round the World in Eighty Days*—though it could be very truly described as 'a rattling good story' in other respects—has no atmosphere and hardly any setting. Its characters, the eccentric Englishman and his comic French valet, pursued by the mistaken detective, rattle round the globe across India, over the Pacific, through the Rockies, over the prairie, and so on, but the author never pauses for a paragraph to give any vivid idea of the landscape, let alone the conviction that we are there ourselves. Mary Webb, on the other hand, holds us spell-bound in that tiny Shropshire world of her own imagining. We stand with her at Sarn:

It may be the water lapping, year in and year out—everywhere you look and listen, water; or the big trees waiting and considering on your right hand and on your left; or the unbreathing quiet of the place, as if it was created but an hour gone, and not created for us.

Atmosphere may be as much a matter of history as of geography. We all know historical novels in which the characters seem like modern people in fancy dress, moving against a faked background. Then there are the precious few, which really transport us into the period, such as Naomi Mitchison's story of Gaul in Cæsar's time, *The Conquered*, and (among children's books) Moyra Charlton's *Pendellion*, about a girl, Venetia, in Elizabeth's reign. This story has its weaknesses—it is loosely constructed, with whole chapters which could be

taken out without spoiling the main plot—but its atmosphere makes it remarkable.

Venetia dressed with care for the evening. She decided to wear her newest dress, a sea-water-green satin that showed up well by candlelight. It was sewn with patterns of tiny seed-pearls, and seed-pearls were worn in the hair. While Patience dressed her head, Venetia read her *Morte d'Arthur* . . .

'What ruff will you wear?' said old Nurse, who had all the ruffs and collars spread on the bed.

'The silver-pointed one,' snapped Mrs. Fane. 'What else with that green gown and the pearls! Nurse, why must you turn the whole press upside-down to look for one item?'

Do not those few lines make you feel that you are in the room? Or even—almost—that you *are* Venetia, sitting deep in the new book you have just been given for your birthday, while housekeeper and maids fuss round you, getting you ready for the supper party to which Philip Sidney and Walter Raleigh are coming?

Style—The Author's Voice on Paper

We now come to the last and most difficult quality to analyse, Style.

Some think that this is just a matter of writing good grammar and avoiding slang, except of course in dialogue and other special places where it is appropriate. It is not nearly so simple as that. H. W. and F. G. Fowler, in their fascinating but rather frightening book, *The King's English*, collected mistakes not only from the best newspapers but from authors like Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, and Ruskin. But grammatical errors and misused words are not so common, even in the cheapest fiction, that they will help us to distinguish the bad writer from the good.

What more often gives away the inferior writer is the use of two words where one would do. 'Sally was beginning to feel doubtful of the wisdom of her course' runs a line in a comic. Why not: 'Sally began to doubt if she had acted wisely'? It is not only the old classics which are sometimes long-winded! Wordiness is bad style in any writer, from the

Cabinet Minister who says 'in the contemplated eventuality' when he means 'if so', to the man scribbling cheap novelettes.

With wordiness goes the cliché, the ready-made group of words used together so often that they no longer convey any vivid special meaning. In such English, evening-dress is always either 'faultless' or 'immaculate', cottages are 'quaint old-world', and the mob 'bare their stained teeth' in a 'wolfish grin', and, instead of just swearing under their breath, 'give vent to muttered imprecations'. When you begin to notice that the same adjective is always in the company of the same noun, you may be sure that the writer is not working carefully, choosing each word separately on its own merits, but is grabbing at them in handfuls of two or three. When, on the other hand, the association of the words hits you as fresh and new, and then (as you think it over) as apt and imaginative, you will know that the writer has a sense of style. Leslie Barringer provided us with some good samples in the previous chapter.

With the *choice* of words go rhythm and euphony—their arrangement to give certain sound effects. The rhythm may be musical, long, and flowing, or it may be jerky; but if it is jerky, it should be only because the author deliberately makes it so, to fit in with his purpose in the story; it should not be jerky by accident. So too with the euphony, the arrangement of syllables so that sounds, whether vowels or consonants, do not come together to produce an ugly result. An author may, once in a while, plan this for the sake of a definite effect. Was the awkward sound effect intended in these examples? 'Sally Bright alighted . . .' (*The Comet*). 'The Skid Kid straddled his bike . . .' (*The Wizard*). And—this is a line of dialogue spoken to a Chinese boy: 'But how, Woo? How?' (*The Wizard*). It sounds more like a fragment of conversation with an owl, and if that was the writer's intention, well and good. Otherwise it suggests that he has no ear for the words he is using.

✓ Good grammar; brevity; a careful choice of words and no clichés; rhythm; and euphony. . . . A fine style has all these virtues, but it has also something less easy to tick off with the blue pencil.

Style is the author's voice on paper. It may vary from book to book, from chapter to chapter, as his physical voice varies its tones. But just as we can recognize in a friend's voice whether he is angry or joking, argumentative or sympathetic, so with practice we can recognize a truly distinctive literary style without seeing the author's name.

How unmistakably the gently ironical voice of Jane Austen rings down the ages in the opening lines of *Northanger Abbey*, in which she pokes fun at the fashionable romantic novel:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor . . . and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. . . . A family of ten children will be always called a fine family, where there are heads, and arms, and legs enough for the number; but the Morlands had little other right to the word, for they were in general very plain, and Catherine, for many years of her life, as plain as any.

Quite different is the voice of the simple Shropshire girl in *Precious Bane*:

It is the story of us all at Sarn, of Mother and Gideon and me, and Jancis (that was so beautiful), and Wizard Beguildy, and the two or three other folk that lived in those parts. . . .

And different again the Welsh boy through whom Richard Llewellyn tells his tale in *How Green Was My Valley*—listen to the Welsh lilt of the voice:

'Well,' he said, 'there is a big boy you have grown, man. How old now?'

'Twelve,' I said, 'and a birthday next week.'

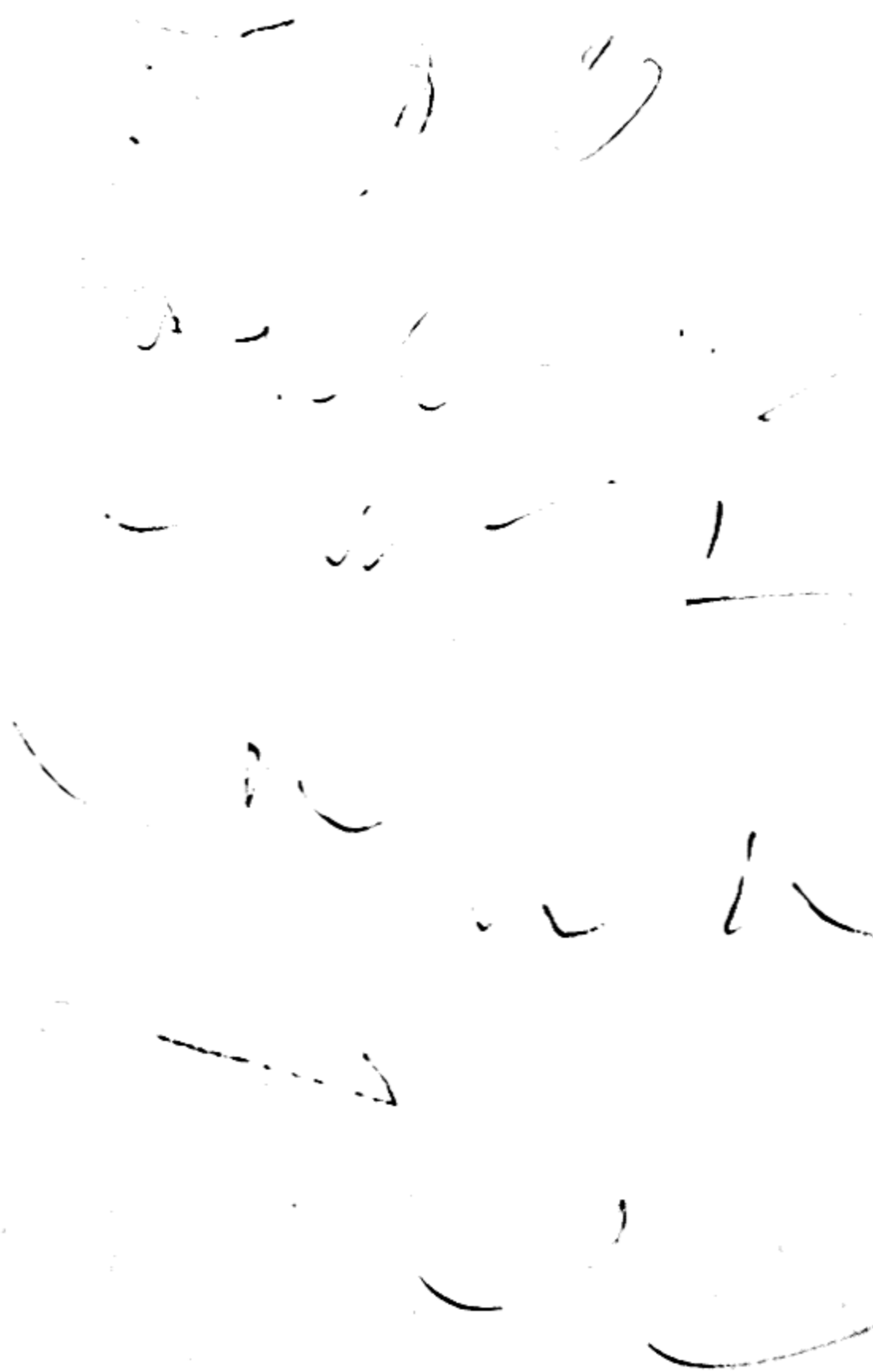
'Oh,' he said, 'like that, is it? Birthday next week, so put your hand in your pocket?'

'No, no,' I said, 'only telling you I was. If you want to give me a present, good. And if not, good.'

Unmistakable, too, is the voice of J. B. Priestley in every line of prose he writes.

That, then, is style, the author's voice on paper, expressing

all he wants to say. And, because there are pleasant voices and rough ones, not all styles are equally good. There have been great writers with bad styles, which have stood between them and their readers, but if they have something important enough to say their message has struggled through. There have been other writers, again, who had beautiful styles and little else, but once the fashion of their day passed they were forgotten. It is the combination of a fine style with some of the other qualities which produces the true masterpiece.



3

THE SHORTER THE BETTER ?

‘OH, IT’S SHORT stories,’ said the boy in a disappointed tone, and thrust the book back onto the library shelf.

Listening, I felt a certain amount of sympathy. There are many times when I, too, do not feel like reading short stories, times when I want to lose myself completely in a novel, the longer the better. In those moods I dislike the effort of starting all over again, every ten pages or so, with fresh characters and a new situation. Yet, while sympathizing with the boy, I hoped that he would not go through life prejudiced against short stories, because, if he did, he was going to miss a great deal. Actually, of course, he was almost sure to read dozens, if not hundreds, because so many magazines contain them. Many people do not mind (and indeed enjoy) short stories in magazines, yet will not read them in a bound volume; whereas it stands to reason, if we stop to think, that it is only the better stories which get collected into books, while nine out of ten in the magazines are just slick journalism, and not always even that.

A truly fine short story should possess, in concentrated form, most of the good qualities we suggested in the last chapter as being desirable in a novel. The basic idea will tend to be of a different kind—some ideas are suitable only for short story treatment, others demand greater length—but a good idea of some sort is almost *more* vital to the short story, for its absence is so painfully obvious when the tale is finished in a few pages. Construction, too, is even more important to the short story than to the novel. There is no time for subplots and digressions; every incident must be chosen carefully to carry the plot forward to its climax. Characters will be

fewer, but their characterization must be as near perfect as possible. Though the short story cannot show them developing from year to year, as the novel can, it may be able to indicate development by selecting some moment in their lives, some vital turning-point, as the theme. It is then as though the reader stood at a bend in the road, looking back along the past life of the character and then forward into his future. In a novel, on the other hand, he can walk in step with the character, sometimes all the way from birth to death.

It is the very neatness and brevity of the good short story, in which the writer has not used an unnecessary word, which give this form of literature a beauty of its own. Someone has said that the most effective ghost-story ever told was in one sentence: "So you don't believe in ghosts?" said the stranger in the railway-carriage, and vanished.' I have always liked, too, the tragic tale of Algy, in even fewer words:

Algy met a bear.
The bear was bulgy.
The bulge was Algy.

Brevity need not always be carried to such extremes, but it remains the essential virtue of this literary form.

The Literature of Laughter

Short stories are particularly suitable for humorous writing; fiction, that is, which aims at making us laugh, and not at very much more. Humour is plentiful in English novels—in Dickens and hundreds of other authors—but it is only one of several elements found there. It springs incidentally from the situations and characters. It is extremely difficult to write a full-length book which is consistently funny throughout, and the task is seldom attempted. Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* and its sequel, about a cycling tour in Germany, are funny only in patches, though the patches are frequent and splendid. Both books owe much of their fun to the miniature short stories which (with essay-like digressions on various topics) keep breaking up the main narrative. The other

humorous writers who spring most quickly to mind are W. W. Jacobs, who gives us the broad comedy of ship and barge, H. H. Munro who (under the pen-name 'Saki') was unequalled for polished wit in the satirizing of fashionable society, and Stephen Leacock, the Canadian professor who was happiest in absurd fantasy, handling such characters as our old enemies A, B and C, who are always digging holes and filling tanks in our Arithmetic books. All these are short story writers. The 'William' books by Richmal Crompton, which many people consider the funniest books written specially for young readers, consist of separate complete episodes, though the same set of characters is used. William never grows any older, nor does Mr Brown learn anything from his endless misfortunes at the hands of his well-meaning son. There is thus no development of character, as there would be in a novel. P. G. Wodehouse is another who, by using the same set of characters—Bertie Wooster, his fantastic friends and relatives, and the imperturbable man-servant Jeeves—has created an absurd little world of his own, which it is always amusing to revisit. This use of the same characters eases the work of the short story writer immensely, both in the thinking out of the plot and in the actual writing, for, when he can rely on the average reader knowing the characters beforehand, he is saved many lines of description and explanation which he can use for action and dialogue instead.

All these writers are extremely individual in appeal. Who is the funniest is a matter of personal taste. The 'William' stories are the most 'knock-about'; that is, many of the laughs come from physical misfortunes which overwhelm the characters. The climax, or *dénouement*—a French word for the same thing, literally the 'unknotting' of the problem in the plot—is often very obvious. Something is mentioned early in the average 'William' story, and the experienced reader learns to spot it, saying to himself: 'That's going to be needed on the last page—it's going to fall on top of Mr Brown. . . .' It is a matter of opinion whether this foreknowledge of catastrophe adds to the reader's pleasure or not. When the author intends us to foresee something which the characters don't, we

get the literary device of 'irony', which is immensely effective whether in tragedy or in farce. But when the author means to keep the reader guessing, but fails, the climax loses much of its effect. Except where writers are deliberately using irony, the surprise-ending is one of the features we look for in most modern short stories. This convention was established by the deft American, O. Henry, who lived from 1862 to 1910.

Wodehouse, Leacock, and 'Saki' lay their stories in a somewhat more fantastic world than the ordinary suburb inhabited by William and his friends. Leacock's art is that of the parodist. In *Nonsense Novels* he is parodying or 'taking off' various kinds of sentimental and melodramatic fiction. His characters are not meant to be real at all. Wodehouse and 'Saki' use country-houses, the West End of London, and fashionable foreign resorts as their settings, and their characters, though much more realistic than Leacock's, are highly polished and exaggerated. Wodehouse's style bubbles with slang and ridiculous verbal inventions. 'Tish-tosh, pingle-pangle, and bubble-and-squeak', says a Wodehouse character, where we might say, 'Nonsense'. 'Saki', who died during the first World War and belongs essentially to the gay England of Edward VII, was a master of the neat phrase, the epigram, and the play upon words. It is easy to pick typical sentences which can stand alone:

The revenge of an elder sister may be long in coming, but, like a South-Eastern express, it arrives in its own good time. . . .

Laura always was inconsiderate . . . she was born during Goodwood week, with an Ambassador staying in the house who hated babies.

'No one would believe it,' said Mrs Packletide, her face changing colour as rapidly as though it were going through a book of patterns before post-time.

'The cook was a good cook, as cooks go; and as cooks go she went.'

Saki's plots are full of ingenuity, his surprise endings masterly. One of his typical fancies is Tobermory, the cat who was taught human speech with embarrassing results:

'What do you think of human intelligence?' asked Mavis Pellington lamely.

'Of whose intelligence in particular?' asked Tobermory coldly.

'Oh, well, mine for instance,' said Mavis, with a feeble laugh.

'You put me in an embarrassing position,' said Tobermory. . . . 'When your inclusion in this house-party was suggested Sir Wilfrid protested that you were the most brainless woman of his acquaintance, and that there was a wide distinction between hospitality and the care of the feeble-minded. . . .'

Some of his stories contain a queer streak of horror, varying the wit and satire. They all stand out for variety, originality, and distinctive style.

The humour of W. W. Jacobs is homely, warm, and ordinary. His world is the Thames estuary, with little schooners and sailing-barges plying between Wapping and Harwich; his characters the skippers and their mates, the boys and the night-watchmen—and, from time to time, the skippers' daughters. One of these was the determined Miss Cringle who captained the *Osprey* when her father was laid low with gout. The comedy springs from her relationship with the 'crew', consisting of one young man, the mate. Though he behaves himself very well on the outward trip she pays him off at Harwich and signs on another man for the return. The new mate behaves very differently, and she is soon wishing she had the former one aboard—when he providentially appears from his hiding place, knocks down the impudent one, and consigns him to 'a little dark dingy hole forward' until the end of the voyage.

'You've hurt him,' said the girl, coming up to the mate and laying her hand on his arm. 'What a horrid temper you've got.'

'It was him asking you to kiss him that upset me,' said the mate apologetically.

'He put his arm round my waist,' said Miss Cringle blushing.

'*What!*' said the mate, stuttering, 'put his—put his arm—round—your waist—like——'

His courage suddenly forsook him.

'Like what?' inquired the girl, with superb innocence.

'Like *that*,' said the mate manfully.

'That'll do,' said Miss Cringle softly, 'that'll do. You're as bad as he is, only the worst of it is there is nobody here to prevent you.'

Detection and Horror

The detective-story, now overwhelmingly popular, began as a short story, and some of its finest examples are still to be found in that form. Sherlock Holmes, whose name is known in every civilized country, was created by Conan Doyle, and appeared originally as a character in the *Strand* magazine. He proved so popular that Doyle (though his own heart was really in historical novels such as *The White Company*) was reluctantly compelled to go on producing more Sherlock Holmes stories, and to publish them in books. Holmes with his dressing-gown, his lean face, his violin, and his hypodermic syringe, standing at the upper window in Baker Street and looking down as hansom-cabs bring terrified clients to him through the mysterious London fog, or in deerstalker cap and cape, kneeling with his magnifying glass to examine uncanny footprints on Dartmoor, is so real to generations of readers that it is hard to remember that he never lived. He was imitated by dozens of writers in novels and boys' weeklies. The very style of his name was echoed—an unusual two-syllable first name, and a monosyllabic surname—in Sexton Blake, Dixon Hawke, Nelson Lee, and many more. But there is only one Holmes, and, though later writers have splashed more blood about and piled the corpses higher, readers who have missed Conan Doyle have missed a great deal.

What made Sherlock Holmes distinctive was his method, which brought the phrase 'scientific deduction' into common speech. Another amateur detective with a distinctive approach is Father Brown, the Irish priest in G. K. Chesterton's stories. In every way, physical and mental, he differs from Doyle's hero. Where Holmes is dramatic, impressive, and mysterious, Father Brown looks simple, mild, and insignificant—a tubby black figure with a comic round face and an umbrella. Yet, when it comes to revealing some horrid crime or demolishing an alibi, he is just as effective as the wizard of Baker Street.

For the tale of horror, too, the short story is especially suitable. It is hard to sustain a blood-curdling atmosphere

throughout a whole book. It is easier for ten or twenty pages, and much more bearable. During that short space we may agree to a 'suspension of disbelief'—that is, though we know all the time at the back of our minds that there are no such things as ghosts and vampires, we can nearly forget that we know it while we are having our blood curdled so delightfully. Edgar Allan Poe does it in a mere half-dozen pages with that classic story, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, which begins: 'True!—nervous—very, very, dreadfully nervous I had been and am! But why *will* you say that I am mad?' Those who can stand this kind of thing in strong doses should try M. R. James's *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. But not too near bed-time.

Humour, horror, detection, and we might add fantasy, fairy-tales, legends of all kinds: these are the subjects to which the short story is particularly suited. In the same way there are other types of theme for which it is definitely unsuitable, such as long family chronicles, and stories laid in unfamiliar historical periods or little-known foreign countries. The author just has not the time, in a short story, to teach the reader history and geography.

If 'brevity is the soul of wit', it is also the essence of the short story. But though this chapter is entitled 'The Shorter the Better?', it would be wrong to suggest that the story of six pages is automatically neater and more artistic than the one of sixteen, or even twenty-six. Indeed, a story might run to sixty, and still qualify as a good short story. That is about the average length of the three which make up Arthur Machen's eerie little book, *The Great God Pan*. The right length for any story is the minimum number of words in which the author can accomplish what he has set out to do. But he must use as many as he needs. A good tailor does not waste cloth, but you must give him the required length or he can do nothing. There is thus a definite place for what is actually called 'the long short story', which falls midway between the novel and the ordinary magazine limit of a few thousand words. Such stories have been written by H. G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, and many others.

Stories of Our Secret Selves

Another point must be made. We have stressed, in considering the short-story form, the importance of plot and climax. We shall find these in the classic short stories of the past and, generally, in the magazine short stories of the present, but in studying the more serious 'literary' examples written in our own century we may be puzzled by an apparent lack of action. We may reach the end with a sense of dissatisfaction, wondering why there seems to be no climax, or—what is still more galling—whether we have not been clever enough to recognize it. The reason for this (and it applies not only to the short story but to the modern novel, to poetry, and indeed to all imaginative writing) is that the new science of psychology—the study of the human soul or mind—has changed our whole idea of human behaviour. We used to think of characters performing certain actions because they deliberately and consciously willed to do so. Now we know that people's actions, likes, and dislikes, often spring from reasons of which they are quite unaware. Scientists have shown us that, below the visible drama of life—the things people do and say—is another drama made up of all the things they *never* do or say, a struggle of thwarted desires and instincts, hopes and fears and dreams. Imaginative writers often find this a more fascinating drama to study and reveal to their readers, partly because it is more difficult, and therefore a challenge to their skill, and partly because it is a new field to explore. Readers who have been brought up on the old ideas of 'action', however, find such stories slow and perplexing at first, until they have, as it were, tuned in their minds to the new wave-length. The heroes of the old stories were men who did things, the heroines were women to whom things happened, but the central character of a modern story may be someone who seems to do nothing remarkable and suffer no noticeable misfortune. Most of us, after all, are like that in real life. It is the achievement of the 'psychological' novelist and short-story writer that he has revealed the submerged drama of everyday existence and made it more interesting than ever before.

It may be some time before we can fully enjoy short stories of this kind. Meanwhile, there are plenty of others. Kathleen Lines has collected twenty-nine well-mixed examples by such writers as Arthur Ransome and Dorothy Sayers, Eleanor Farjeon and Hugh Walpole, in a volume entitled *Stories for Girls*. Then there is Clark and Lieber's *Great Short Stories of the World* and John Hadfield's selection of *Modern Short Stories* in the Everyman Library. Such volumes give some idea of the wonderful variety of short stories there are to choose from.

Important note.

The worst book I have
seen in my life is -
"Enjoying Books".
Reading of this
book is to cause head-
ache. Therefore kindly
never try to read this
book.

Note written by
John Hadfield

4

PLAYS IN PRINT

SOME PEOPLE ARE surprised when they hear of anyone who reads plays. Amateur acting, they can understand, though they may not like it themselves. Play-reading in groups . . . well, they can see the point in that too. But to read a play silently by oneself, like a novel, seems to them quite an extraordinary way to spend an evening.

It is not so strange, however, when we realize that a play is rather *like* a novel which (except for stage-directions) is all dialogue. Many novels (including detective-stories and popular children's books) are nearly all dialogue anyhow. The play just leaves out the inverted commas and puts the name of the speaker in the margin instead of 'he said' or 'she answered'. A play is sometimes rather harder work for the imagination of the reader, because he has to visualize the people and the scene for himself to a far greater extent than when reading a novel; and that is why lazy readers shy off from this form of story-telling. On the other hand, the play has certain advantages: plenty of action, usually, strong situation, and effective climax; and as each line has been tested by being spoken in the theatre, it has a higher polish, is neater, and has a better rhythm than the prose of the average novel.

What do we look for in our fiction? Laughter? Excitement and mystery? Romance and sentiment? Or a glimpse into the everyday lives of other people? Poetical beauty—or startling new ideas about the world we live in? Any or all of these qualities, surely, varying with our personal taste or our mood of the moment.

They can all be found in plays. From time to time we get

the chance to seek them in the theatre, where alone a play can come fully to life. More often we must make do with radio, film and television productions. But even the luckiest play-lover—living in London *and* possessing television—can seldom get exactly the play he wants, or even the *kind* he wants, at any particular moment. Here the printed play comes in. Just as the real music-lover will always want his own gramophone and favourite records, so the play-lover will build up his own shelf of drama and ransack that section of his public library.

Let us test that drama section and see whether it can meet our demands. First, laughter. Those who think that reading plays is dull should try this little scene in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Jack Worthing, for good reasons which appear when we read the whole play, is known to his London friends as 'Ernest'. He has just told one of them, Algernon, that he hopes to marry a girl named Gwendolen.

ALGERNON: My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. (*Rings bell.*)

JACK: Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know anyone of the name of Cecily.

Enter LANE.

ALGERNON: Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here.

LANE: Yes, sir.

LANE goes out.

JACK: Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

ALGERNON: Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up.

JACK: There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

Enter LANE with the cigarette case on a salver. ALGERNON takes it at once.

LANE goes out.

ALGERNON: I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. *Opens case and examines it.* However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK: Of course it's mine. *Moving to him.* You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is

written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

ALGERNON: Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

JACK: I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

ALGERNON: Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.

JACK: Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON: Your aunt!

JACK: Yes. Charming old lady she is too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells. Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON: *retreating to back of sofa*: But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? *Reading*: 'From little Cecily with her fondest love.'

JACK: *moving to the sofa and kneeling upon it*: My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. *Follows ALGERNON round the room.*

ALGERNON: Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK: It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

ALGERNON: You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd you saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. (*Taking it from case.*) 'Mr. Ernest Worthing, B.4, The Albany.' I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else. *Puts the card in his pocket.*

JACK: Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

ALGERNON: Yes, but that does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Cecily, who lives at Tunbridge Wells, calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out at once.

JACK: My dear Algy, you talk exactly as if you were a dentist.

Audiences have laughed at this play every year since it was

first performed in 1895 and it is now accepted as one of the great artificial comedies. Artificial, because Wilde's characters are not real people, but mouthpieces for his own wit. No one ever talked so neatly and wittily in real life—what fun it would be (for the first few minutes anyhow) if they did! Wilde's art was the art of the epigram, the brief bright saying which is not necessarily true, but makes us laugh at the first hearing. Before we have time to reflect, the pace of the dialogue carries us on and we are already laughing at the next line. When Wilde thought of an epigram he stored it in his mind until he could use it, either in a play or in private conversation. Whether it suits the character who is made to speak it in the play is not always an important consideration. Many of these epigrams are made up simply by turning an ordinary remark inside-out. 'It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private——' where normally we say 'in public', and so on.

The play is rich, too, in absurd situations. Here we have one which is 'good theatre', the spectacle of a man telling lies and getting more and more entangled as he goes on. And here is another, where Jack, who wishes to propose to Gwendolen, has managed to get her alone for five minutes while her mother, the formidable Lady Bracknell, is out of the room. In the old-fashioned romantic plays which Wilde was taking off the heroine would have been modest and defensive, the hero passionate—and the entrance of the heroine's mother would have reduced the girl to utter confusion. Wilde gets his usual pleasure from turning things, situations and phrases alike, inside-out.

GWENDOLEN: I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.

JACK: Well . . . may I propose to you now?

GWENDOLEN: I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.

JACK: Gwendolen!

GWENDOLEN: Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?

JACK: You know what I have got to say to you.

GWENDOLEN: Yes, but you don't say it.

JACK: Gwendolen, will you marry me? (*Goes on his knees.*)

GWENDOLEN: Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

JACK: My own one, I have never loved any one in the world but you.

GWENDOLEN: Yes, but men often propose for practice. I know my brother Gerald does. All my girl-friends tell me so. What wonderfully blue eyes you have, Ernest! They are quite, quite, blue. I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present.

Enter LADY BRACKNELL.

LADY BRACKNELL: Mr Worthing! Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous.

GWENDOLEN: Mamma! (*He tries to rise; she restrains him.*) I must beg you to retire. This is no place for you. Besides, Mr. Worthing has not quite finished yet.

LADY BRACKNELL: Finished what, may I ask?

GWENDOLEN: I am engaged to Mr. Worthing, mamma. (*They rise together.*)

LADY BRACKNELL: Pardon me, you are not engaged to any one. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself. . . .

It is interesting to compare Wilde with Sheridan, the master of artificial comedy a century earlier. Compare Lady Bracknell with another female dragon in *The Rivals*, in this case the heroine's aunt, who rather similarly interferes with the course of true love. Mrs Malaprop delights in long words without having an exact knowledge of their meaning. Here she lays down the law on girls' education:

I would by no means wish a daughter of mine to be a progeny of learning. . . . But, Sir Anthony, I would send her, at nine years old, to a boarding-school, in order to learn a little ingenuity and artifice. Then, sir, she would have a supercilious knowledge of accounts; and as she grew up, I would have her instructed in geometry, that she might know something of the contagious countries. . . .

When we actually go to the theatre, of course, we laugh at all kinds of comedies. We may enjoy anything from pantomime and knockabout farce to the polished comedy of manners such as we have quoted. On the whole, though, we

shall probably find that the best for reading at home is the type in which the laughter springs rather from the wit of the lines than from actors pulling funny faces or losing their trousers.

Thrills in the Theatre

What about excitement? War, crime, adventures of all kinds are frequent themes. In *Journey's End*, by R. C. Sherriff, it is war. The scene is a dug-out. Raleigh, hardly more than a boy, is to make his first raid on the German trenches. Osborne, an older, kindly officer, is going with him. Osborne knows just how dangerous it is going to be—he is killed himself, a few minutes later—but his one concern at the moment is to stop Raleigh from getting nervous. His tone is as casual as he can make it. Only by reading between the lines can the audience guess at his true state of mind. He has laid his signet-ring on the table.

RALEIGH: I say, here's your ring.

OSBORNE: Yes. I'm—I'm leaving it here. I don't want the risk of losing it.

RALEIGH: Oh! (*There is silence. He puts the ring slowly down.*)

OSBORNE: (*rising*) Well, I think perhaps we ought to get ready.

RALEIGH: Yes. Righto. (*He also rises.*)

OSBORNE: I'm not going to wear a belt—just my revolver, with the lanyard round my neck.

RALEIGH: I see . . . I feel better with this in my hand, don't you?

OSBORNE: Yes. Something to hold. Loaded all right?

RALEIGH: Yes.

(*They put on their helmets. OSBORNE takes his pipe from his mouth and lays it carefully on the table.*)

OSBORNE: I do hate leaving a pipe when it's got a nice glow on the top like that.

RALEIGH: (*with a short laugh*) What a pity! . . .

OSBORNE: Three minutes to. I think we'd better go.

No epigrams here, no literary graces. The everyday phrases have the effect most needed—they make the scene as real as though we, too, were in the dug-out, waiting to go over the top. Their very curtness helps to build up the quiet tension, so soon to be broken by shots and explosions off-stage, and tragedy.

Here is another exciting moment from Gordon Daviot's *Richard of Bordeaux*. Richard the Second has landed from Ireland to find his kingdom in revolt. He is betrayed on all sides. At Conway Castle he is met by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who tries to lead him into a trap. But the King's friend, Montague, after a glance through the window, sees through the trap.

MONTAGUE: You say you came here alone from Flint with only two followers?

CANTERBURY: With only these two who are with me now.

MONTAGUE: And what are those, my lord?

CANTERBURY: Those what? Really, my lord!

MONTAGUE: Those points of light among the trees?

CANTERBURY: I really don't know. The sun is shining on something bright, I expect.

MONTAGUE: Yes, the sun is shining on something bright! (*Maudelyn closes the door and bolts it.*) Do you think we are fools? That is the sun shining on helmets and spear-points. You and your two followers!

As for mystery, and that particular kind of excitement which sends a pleasant shudder down the reader's spine, there are innumerable plays, ranging from Edgar Wallace's *On the Spot* with its Chicago gunmen to Dorothy Sayers's wholly English *Busman's Honeymoon*. But if you want that shudder plus something unusual, read *Outward Bound*, by Sutton Vane.

The scene is the bar of a small liner, just sailing. One by one the passengers drift in, greet the old bar-tender Scrubby, who is polishing glasses, and introduce themselves. At first it all seems perfectly ordinary; then we begin to notice a number of peculiar things. Some of the passengers, notably an old charwoman, are not the sort we should expect to find on an ocean voyage. Also, though some try to conceal the fact, none of them can remember where they are going or how they got on board. Nor, when they go out on deck, can they see any crew. It is Tom, a weak young man who has made a mess of his life, who stumbles on the shattering truth which brings down the curtain on Act One.

TOM: I am right, aren't I, Scrubby?

SCRUBBY: Right, sir, in the head, do you mean?

TOM: (*takes a drink*) You know what I mean.

SCRUBBY: No, I don't, sir. Right about what?

TOM: You—I—all of us on this boat.

SCRUBBY: What about all of us on this boat, sir?

TOM: (*trembling with apprehension*) We are—now answer me truthfully—we are all dead, aren't we?

SCRUBBY: (*after a pause. Very quietly, with firm conviction*) Yes, sir, we are all dead. Quite dead. They don't find out so soon as you have, as a rule.

Morbid? On the contrary, this play (which mixes a good deal of laughter and sentiment with its eerie atmosphere) stresses the importance of facing life with courage. That message is repeated, and more definitely related to the troubles of our modern world, in Robert Ardrey's *Thunder Rock*.

Here, too, most of the characters are dead. The scene is a lighthouse on Lake Michigan where Charleston, a newspaperman disgusted with wars and horrors, is living a hermit's existence. A tablet on the wall commemorates Captain Joshua Stuart who, with all his crew and passengers, was shipwrecked and drowned in 1849. Charleston spends a great deal of his time thinking about these long-dead people, and how they felt about the troubled world of *their* day. At last, so intensely has he imagined some of them, that they come to life. He has just said good-bye to the motor-boat which has brought his month's supplies, and is facing complete solitude again, when heavy steps are heard descending the spiral staircase overhead. A bulky figure, in the clothes of the last century, steps into the light on the stage. Charleston says, very low: 'Captain Joshua.' And the man who was drowned in 1849 answers: 'A good evening to you', and the curtain comes down on the first act.

Romance and Reality

From this strong meat let us turn to the romance and sentiment of Sir James Barrie's *Quality Street*. The period is that of the Napoleonic Wars. Susan and Phoebe Throssel are awaiting a visit from a great friend, Mr Valentine Brown, and Susan is sure he is coming to propose to her

pretty young sister. Alas, when Mr Brown calls it is to say that he is enlisting in the army, and no mention is made of marriage. He is away ten years, during which time the ladies lose all their money, and are forced to start a little private school. They are not at all qualified to do so, and poor Susan, especially, is in continual difficulty.

MISS SUSAN: Phoebe, if a herring and a half cost three ha'pence, how many for elevenpence?

PHOEBE: (*instantly*) Eleven.

MISS SUSAN: William Smith says it is fifteen; and he is such a big boy, do you think I ought to contradict him? May I say there are differences of opinion about it? No one can be really sure, Phoebe.

PHOEBE: It is eleven. I once worked it out with real herrings. (*Stoutly.*) Susan, we must never let the big boys know that we are afraid of them. To awe them, stamp with the foot, speak in a ferocious voice, and look them unflinchingly in the face. (*Then she pales.*) Oh, Susan, Isabella's father insists on her acquiring algebra.

MISS SUSAN: What is algebra exactly; is it those three-cornered things?

PHOEBE: It is x minus y equals z plus y and things like that. And all the time you are saying they are equal, you feel in your heart, why should they be?

This is nothing to the complications which arise when Mr Brown returns from the wars, and Phoebe disguises herself as her quite non-existent niece, Livvy. But all comes out right in the end.

'A glimpse into the everyday lives of other people.' Given space, we could make a list of plays covering almost every occupation and every setting from a palace to a slum—prison (*Now Barabbas*) public schools (*Young Woodley*, *The Housemaster*), a German girls' school, a Spanish convent, among American tobacco-pickers, Lancashire mill-girls, and Irish peasants. Some of the plays have been true to life, other false or exaggerated.

One play which (to a mere male) reads convincingly, and would probably interest many girls, is *Nine Till Six* by Aimée and Philip Stuart. It is set 'behind the scenes' in a West End dress-shop. No customers are shown, but we get to know everybody from the proprietress and the departmental heads down to the mannequins and apprentices. We learn their

characters, secret worries, ambitions, friendships and feuds; at the same time, we learn how hard life can be behind the glamorous frontages of Regent Street. Here is Mrs Pembroke engaging young Gracie Abbot, who has come after a job with her mother:

MRS. PEMBROKE: Then you must learn to know the stock, so that when anything is wanted you will be able to fetch it at once. Our model-girls, or mannequins as they're called, are not supposed to do anything except show off the clothes.

GRACIE: (*her eyes glowing*) That's what I'd like to do.

MRS. ABBOT: (*sharply*) Don't let your father hear you say that!

MRS. PEMBROKE: Why not, Mrs. Abbot?

MRS. ABBOT: 'Er father's very particular——

MRS. PEMBROKE: So am I. My mannequins are very nice girls. They just happen to have the correct measurements, that's all.

In a similar way John van Druten's *London Wall* takes us behind the scenes in a City office.

Poetry and Problems

'Poetical beauty. . . .' With an effort I have so far avoided mentioning Shakespeare. We are all introduced to him at school, and unless we are put off him by rank bad teaching or horrible examination-papers (neither of which are *his* fault) we should realize what pleasure can be got from reading some more of his plays in our own time. He combines most, if not all, of the qualities we are seeking—think of the laughter in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the excitement in *Henry V*, the mystery in *Macbeth*, the poetical beauty everywhere. But even if he had never lived, there would have been plenty of other verse plays, starting with those of his young predecessor, Marlowe. Have you ever tried *Doctor Faustus*—the tragedy of the Renaissance scientist who sold himself to the Devil? Read that tremendous last scene when, a few minutes before midnight, Faustus is waiting for the Devil to come and claim his bargain:

The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The Devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd. . . .

And that terrible last cry when the clock strikes, the mouth of Hell yawns amid thunder and lightning, and the demons appear to seize him. Vainly he cowers back:

My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!
Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!
Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer!
I'll burn my books!—Ah, Mephistophilis!

Not only the Elizabethans wrote in verse. There is to-day a noticeable move towards poetic drama. People have tired of nothing but prosaic, everyday speech—they hunger for lovely words, rhythmically arranged, and they are finding, too, that the neatness of verse gives a keener edge to wit. T. S. Eliot, commonly regarded as the leading figure among the modern poets, has written *Murder in the Cathedral* (about Thomas-à-Becket), *Family Reunion*, and *The Cocktail Party*, while an entirely new poet, Christopher Fry, has burst into the world of the theatre with such plays as *Venus Observed*. Turning from the latest plays to the oldest, we find that new, much more readable, translations of the ancient Greek dramas are coming out, some in the Penguin Classics. These are the peaks of appreciation, to be tackled when our taste for plays and poetry is well developed.

Finally, there are the plays we read for the ideas and problems they discuss. The Norwegian, Ibsen, was the pioneer in this field. Any boy or girl should be able to enjoy *An Enemy of the People*, about an honest doctor who was determined to tell the truth, however unpopular it made him in his home town. It is an exciting play, leading up to a public meeting and windows smashed by the mob. Girls, too, might like Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which has nothing to do with dolls but is concerned with a married woman's right to some life of her own at a date (1879) when this was seriously disputed by most respectable people. The play is not so old-fashioned as it sounds!

Bernard Shaw is our own great playwright of ideas. He had the wit Ibsen lacked, and sought his aim through comedy rather than strong drama. *Androcles and the Lion* and *St. Joan*

have been found to appeal to boys and girls particularly—*St. Joan* is (for Shaw) unusually moving, as well as witty and thought-provoking. Of his modern plays *Pygmalion* (which was tremendously successful as a film) is perhaps the best to begin with, because it has a real story, about a professor of phonetics who, for a bet, takes a Cockney flower-girl out of the gutter, transforms her speech and manners, and launches her in society as a 'lady'. Professor Higgins, Eliza Doolittle, and her dustman father are among the most famous of Shaw's characters.

Among the plays mentioned everyone should be able to find some to suit his taste. Other authors to try are John Drinkwater, J. B. Priestley, John Galsworthy, Sean O'Casey, and J. M. Synge.

5

RHYME AND REASON

SOME PEOPLE CAN see no point in poetry. Why, they ask, use long-winded, flowery rigmarole, when we can say what we want to say in plain straightforward prose? This is not quite fair. Good poetry should *not* be long-winded or flowery, and you do not automatically get plain straightforward English just by making sure that it has neither rhyme nor regular rhythm. Flecker, a brilliant young poet who died in 1915, addressed some moving verses 'to a poet a thousand years hence', the last stanza being:

Since I can never see your face,
And never shake you by the hand,
I send my soul through time and space
To greet you. You will understand.

There are only two words there of more than one syllable. Not a word has been twisted out of its natural order or meaning. Yet, reading it, we may feel that it has something which prose could not give. Compare it with the 'prose' of a Cabinet Minister answering a question in Parliament: 'The very moment the situation is such where I think I am in a position to advise my colleagues that it is safe to remove the ration, at that moment it will be removed.' Which is the plainer English?

Obviously there is good prose and bad prose, good verse and bad verse. Verse is not, by the way, just a fancy kind of prose—it is an older form of literature. Centuries before writing was known in Europe, long stories like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were made up in verse for the simple reason that otherwise the professional story-tellers could never have

remembered the words exactly. Practical hints on farming were made up in verse as well, for the same reason. The shorter poems came into existence as songs. Only when the alphabet was invented, and handwritten books began to circulate, could prose literature come into existence. Verse was not scrapped, though, nor has it been scrapped to-day, even after five centuries of the printing press. So there must be something about it, apart from its being easier to remember.

L. A. G. Strong, the novelist, radio storyteller, and children's author, wrote a book many years ago called *Common Sense About Poetry*. In it he gave an imaginary epitaph:

These are the bones of Elizabeth Gurney,
Who fell off a tram and broke her journey.

Would this sound as well, he asked, if the poor lady's name had been Bradshaw, thus destroying the rhyme? Or if we destroyed the rhythm, also, by writing the statement as prose?

These bones are those of Elizabeth Gurney, who broke
her journey by falling off a tram.

Most of us enjoy a funny limerick, especially about somebody we know. 'That's jolly neat', we say, chuckling over some scandalous five-line composition about our headmaster—and in that word 'neat' we lay our finger on one of the first things which make verse better, for some purposes, than prose. Neatness, finish. . . . That is what verse provides. But this is not only valuable in humorous writing. A Greek poet Theognis, living five centuries before Christ, saw people at funerals mourning over the dead. It struck him that the really sad thought was not that some old man had lived out his span of days: it was the quickness with which youth and beauty pass. Every one else was thinking about the dead man, but Theognis was looking at the boys and the girls in the procession, and thinking how soon they would be middle-

aged, and then old, in their turn. The Greeks thought nothing in the world so beautiful as a young human being. So Theognis, with true Greek simplicity and economy of words, wrote just two lines, which T. F. Higham has translated:

What fools men are to weep the dead and gone!
Unwept, youth drops its petals one by one.

Neat? More than neat. But there is nothing funny about it.

How does it Sound ?

This chapter is not an attempt to make poetry-lovers out of people who hate the stuff. If any such are reading these lines—and if they would *like* to enjoy poetry, as their friends obviously do, but just cannot see anything in it—then they should get hold of a little book called *Poetry for You*, by C. Day Lewis. They may not be impressed because he is one of the foremost living poets in England, but when they hear that he has also written a junior novel of schoolboy gangs, *The Otterbury Incident*, and detective stories under his pen-name of Nicholas Blake, they will see that at least he is not a poet merely because he is no good at anything else. Even those who already like poetry should read this book, and perhaps the other one previously mentioned, by L. A. G. Strong. They will understand better then why they enjoy the poems they do, and that means they will enjoy them still more. They may also discover poets who are fresh to them, and they will be better equipped to recognize fine work when they meet it.

When all is said and done, however, the best way to develop a love of poetry is to read it—preferably aloud. Long years ago, at Oxford, I used to lie at one end of a tethered punt under the willows, taking turns with another young man, reclining opposite, to read poems. Each of us was much more interested in what he read himself than what he heard from the other end of the boat, but I think we each caught a little of the other's enthusiasm, and in this way extended

our appreciation into new territory. He, I recall, was particularly fond of Wordsworth, while I favoured what I regarded as the 'moderns', though most of them were dead except A. E. Housman—and he was an old professor at Cambridge which seemed to me (as a loyal Oxford man) almost the same thing. It is a natural and easy mistake for young readers to assume that poets are all dead. I should have been very surprised if any one had told me, one of those afternoons on the river, that some of the other undergraduates who might pass at any moment in punt or canoe would in a few years be rising stars of English poetry. Yet they were there, as yet unrecognized—W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice—and C. Day Lewis had left only a few terms before.

I only wish that we—that is, you the reader of this book and I its writer—were lying opposite each other in a punt on that leaf-arched river outside Oxford, taking turns to pick out the poems we liked best. As it is, I have to imagine your share of the afternoon, and that is difficult because tastes vary so much. All I can do is to choose some poems I specially like, and try to indicate why; and you, as you read this, may like to pause and think what you would choose to read back to me, each time it was your turn. Our personal choices will show what qualities we look for in poetry.

Beauty of sound is, I think, the first thing *I* look for. After all, the sound of the poem, rather than its exact literal meaning, is what we go for when we first meet poetry as little children. Many nursery rhymes sound rather senseless—but they also sound pleasant, and so they live on for centuries. Very small children can enjoy the rhythm and music of great poetry long before they have the slightest idea what it is about. There is a story about a small child who, for the first time in her life, was staying a night away from her parents. When bedtime came, she announced that she could not possibly go to sleep until some one read her the poem about the flying birdies. 'Oh—er—certainly,' said her aunt, 'but which one do you mean? There are rather a lot of poems

about birds, you know.' The child knew neither title nor author, but sleep was unthinkable until the poem had been read. Her uncle arrived in the bedroom and joined in the conference. 'What sort of birds were they?' She did not know; in fact, the only thing she seemed to know for certain was that she could never sleep without hearing the poem. Uncle and aunt looked at each other anxiously, for there were grown-up friends downstairs, waiting to be fed. Did she mean Shelley's *To a Skylark* or Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*? The girl looked blank. Uncle went downstairs to search the bookshelves. The guests, hearing what was the matter, began to get bright ideas of their own, and then, one by one, to wander upstairs with their suggestions. Was it *The Eagle* by Tennyson or *The Hawk* by A. C. Benson, *The Kingfisher* by W. H. Davies or *The October Redbreast* by Alice Meynell? At last some one had an inspiration. Were the birds called 'echoes'? The girl's face lit up. She nodded vigorously. Yes, they were 'wild echoes flying'. So they read her that poem of Tennyson's, inspired (I believe) by a visit to Killarney, in which no bird of any kind is mentioned:

The splendour falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story:
The long light shakes across the lakes,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.

O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer, farther going!
O sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!
Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying:
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying. . . .

Even before she could understand the meaning, she had fallen under the spell of Tennyson, perhaps the greatest master of word *music* in English poetry.

Another poem she might have enjoyed, without knowing all the words, is W. H. Auden's *Night Mail*:

This is the night mail crossing the border,
 Bringing the cheque and the postal-order,
 Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
 The shop at the corner and the girl next door.
 Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb—
 The gradient's against her, but she's on time.

Later it rattles on:

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
 Letters of joy from girl and boy,
 Receipted bills and invitations
 To inspect new stock or visit relations,
 And applications for situations,
 And timid lovers' declarations,
 And gossip, gossip from all the nations,
 News circumstantial, news financial,
 Letters with holiday snaps to enlarge in,
 Letters with faces scrawled in the margin. . . .

Not exactly musical—but how well it catches the rhythm of the train! This poem, with many more about trains and other modern subjects, can be found in *A Book of Town Verse*, edited by T. W. Sussams, and very handy for the pocket.

Just one more poem where sound really matters more than meaning. It is by A. C. Swinburne, another nineteenth-century poet with a genius for word music. He had not Tennyson's variety of talents, his poems are much more of one type, and the rhythm is so insistent, the alliterations so heavily piled one upon another, that it is easy to forget what his poems are about—we find ourselves hypnotized by the mere sound. But, at his best, he is tremendous. Try chanting aloud the Chorus from *Atalanta in Calydon*:

When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces,
 The mother of months in meadow or plain
 Fills the shadows and windy places
 With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain;
 And the brown bright nightingale amorous
 Is half assuaged for Itylus,
 For the Thracian ships and the foreign faces,
 The tongueless vigil and all the pain.

Come with bows bent and with emptying of quivers,
 Maiden most perfect, lady of light,
 With a noise of winds and many rivers,
 With a clamour of waters, and with might;
 Bind on thy sandals, O thou most fleet,
 Over the splendour and speed of thy feet;
 For the faint east quickens, the wan west shivers,
 Round the feet of the day and the feet of the night. . . .

And on, through the other five stanzas:

To the limbs that glitter, the feet that scare
 The wolf that follows, the fawn that flies.

You will find this, together with most of the best short poems written between 1250 and 1900, in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. That book, with its thousand-odd pages, is one to buy and treasure for the rest of your life. If you can get it printed on India paper, as I did when I was at school, it will be thin enough to go into any sensible pocket.

Splendour and Thrills: The Story Poem

After the first pleasure in the mere *sound* of a poem, which can be felt (as we have seen) even by a little child but remains however old we grow, the next thing we learn to enjoy in poetry is probably a story. Here the sense matters very much indeed. The Greeks and Romans had long story-poems, or epics, and our own poetry begins with the ballads. Since the prose novel came into existence there has been less scope for the story poem, but even so there are plenty of modern examples.

Some boys (I was one of them) like the one by Sir Henry Newbolt, *He fell among Thieves*, about a young English officer captured by tribesmen on the North-west Frontier:

He flung his empty revolver down the slope,
 He climbed alone to the Eastward edge of the trees. . . .

Many grown-ups are inclined to sneer at Newbolt. He was only a very minor poet, admittedly, old-fashioned and narrow

in his vision, over-much concerned with one small section of the English people, those who went to Public Schools and took commissions in the Indian Army. I can hear some superior person saying that this poem is no more than a fragment of a boys' adventure-story, and should have been written in prose and printed in a boys' paper. Possibly. That *could* be taken as a compliment—by all those boys, and many girls, who like adventure-stories in weekly magazines. But there is something more about Newbolt's poem, some justification for his writing it in verse. The rhyme and the rhythm *add* something. They sharpen the picture, heighten the tension, deepen the feeling:

He did not hear the monotonous roar that fills
The ravine where the Yassin river sullenly flows;
He did not see the starlight on the Laspur hills,
Or the far Afghan snows.

Perhaps 'he' did not. But I did—almost—when at sixteen I first met those words. No prose could have made the scene so vivid for me.

Alfred Noyes could have written *The Highwayman* as a magazine-story. But would the prose of any popular romance-writer—even best-selling Baroness Orczy in her *Beau Brocade*—have sent quite the same shiver down one's spine as that opening verse?

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding—
Riding—riding—
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

The story develops like a film. Romance first, with Bess, the landlord's daughter. Then drama, with the arrival of the soldiers:

They said no word to the landlord, they drank his ale instead,
But they gagged his daughter and bound her to the foot of her
narrow bed. . . .

Now the awful suspense, as she waits for her unsuspecting lover, riding into the trap they have laid for him:

Tlot-tlot; tlot-tlot! Had they heard it? The horse-hoofs
ringing clear. . . .

Then the climax—I must not spoil the story if the poem is new to you, but it builds up to one of those wonderful sequences beloved of the film-director, in which the hero gallops on and on along the road at tremendous speed, and we, in the cinema, hold on to our seats:

Back he spurred like a madman, shouting a curse to the sky,
With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier
brandished high!

I know only one other gallop in poetry which rivals this—Robert Browning's *How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix*.

Another fine story-poem is *Morte d'Arthur*, with its unforgettable beginning:

So all day long the noise of battle roll'd
Among the mountains by the winter sea;
Until King Arthur's table, man by man,
Had fall'n in Lyonesse about their Lord,
King Arthur . . .

and going on with its word-pictures which are at the same time mysterious and shadowy yet somehow vivid:

A broken chancel with a broken cross,
That stood on a dark strait of barren land.
On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

And again:

He, stepping down
By zigzag paths, and juts of pointed rock,
Came on the shining levels of the lake.

And the haunting recurrent refrain, as the disobedient Sir Bedivere lies to the dying King:

‘I heard the ripple washing in the reeds,
And the wild water lapping on the crag.’

And then the throwing of the magic sword Excalibur into the lake and the appearance of an arm—

Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,
That caught him by the hilt, and brandished him
Three times, and drew him under in the mere.

And the ‘dusky barge, dark as a funeral scarf from stem to stern’, in which the three nameless queens take Arthur away:

To the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep meadow’d, happy, fair with orchard-lawns
And bowery hollows crown’d with summer sea. . . .

And that last sad glimpse of Sir Bedivere alone on the shore, watching:

till the hull
Look’d one black dot against the verge of dawn,
And on the mere the wailing died away.

You will notice that in this poem Tennyson, who is said to have mastered more different metres than any English poet before him, has chosen to write in blank verse like that of Shakespeare’s plays, without using rhyme. Rhyme (though it adds so much to most English poetry) is not essential. Rhythm—some sort of pattern in the beat, however varied or irregular—is what marks the real boundary between prose and verse. The Greeks and Romans used no rhyme, nor did the Anglo-Saxon minstrels, so we must not fall into the common error of thinking there is something incomplete in a poem which lacks this feature.

It plays an essential part in the one other story-poem I

should choose to read from my end of the punt, G. K. Chesterton's *Lepanto*. I suppose one would call this a story-poem, though the story is not told in such a straightforward manner as any of the previous examples. It changes scene rapidly, and then back again, rather as a film-director cuts from one short sequence to another. It deals with the Battle of Lepanto, where Don John of Austria gained a dramatic naval victory over the Turks in 1571, which marked the turning-point in their advance across the Mediterranean. Chesterton wishes to show how important the occasion was. He paints in, with vivid phrases, the critical plight of Christian Europe lying at the mercy of the Sultan,

For the inmost sea of all the earth is shaken with his ships—

and the indifference of the western nations:

The cold Queen of England is looking in the glass;
The shadow of the Valois is yawning at the Mass;
From evening isles fantastical rings faint the Spanish gun. . . .

Incidentally, if you are to understand every word of this poem, you will often have to stop to think—and perhaps look up your history-book. The 'cold Queen' is of course Elizabeth, who as a Protestant sovereign does not feel inclined to answer the Pope's appeal for a new crusade. 'The shadow of the Valois' is Henri III, one of France's worst kings and the unworthy last member of the Valois line, and the 'evening isles fantastical' are the West Indies, where the Spaniards are much more concerned with the easy conquest of Indians than with meeting the Turkish menace from the East. Some poems require this kind of study before they yield their full meaning, but any one should be able to enjoy *Lepanto* by surrendering himself to the splendid rhythm and the flashing phrases. It can always be read again for the references.

At first the outlook for Christian Europe seems distinctly black. Only one leader answers the Pope's appeal—and he is nobody of much consequence, 'a crownless prince' on 'a nameless throne'. But men rally to him:

In that enormous silence, tiny and unafraid,
 Comes up along a winding road the noise of the Crusade.
 Strong gongs groaning as the guns boom far,
 Don John of Austria is going to the war,
 Stiff flags straining in the night-blasts cold,
 In the gloom black-purple, in the glint old-gold,
 Torchlight crimson on the copper kettle-drums,
 Then the tuckets, then the trumpets, then the cannon,
 and he comes.

Don John laughing in the brave beard curled,
 Spurning of his stirrups like the thrones of all the world,
 Holding his head up for a flag of all the free.
 Love-light of Spain—hurrah!
 Death-light of Africa!
 Don John of Austria
 Is riding to the sea.

Note the skill of that writing, how the third line suggests the sound, not only by alliteration of all those 'g's but by the assonance of all those 'o's and 'oo's, especially the 'strong gongs'. (Assonance means putting together sounds which are similar but do not actually rhyme.) Note the use of very long lines and very short ones. The one about the tuckets and trumpets is made still longer by its commas—doesn't it give the exact feeling we get when watching some great procession, expecting every moment to see the principal figure come into sight? And then, when he does at last, just as we in the crowd break into cheers, the poem with its short lines does the same.

And so it goes on, with ever-mounting excitement, until the naval battle opens, and we can almost hear it:

Gun upon gun, ha! ha!
 Gun upon gun, hurrah!
 Don John of Austria
 Has loosed the cannonade.

He wins, and that means freedom for the Christian slaves who have been chained to their oars in the Turkish galleys:

Don John pounding from the slaughter-painted poop,
 Purpling all the ocean like a bloody pirate's sloop,
 Scarlet running over on the silvers and the golds,

Breaking of the hatches up and bursting of the holds,
 Thronging of the thousands up that labour under sea,
 White for bliss and blind for sun and stunned for liberty
Vivat Hispania!
Domino Gloria!
 Don John of Austria
 Has set his people free!

Shoukat Ali

One can enjoy *Lepanto* even without looking up its historical details and Latin phrases.

Both *Morte d'Arthur* and *Lepanto* do much more than merely tell a story; they also present us with vivid pictures. Many short poems are all picture, and no story at all. But here are two longer ones, each of which *has* a very simple plot, though the poet is more interested in lingering to depict scene and character.

In *Reynard the Fox* John Masefield tells the simple story of one morning's hunt, but he takes over seventy pages to do it, introducing us to every person at the Meet—almost indeed to every horse and hound—and then taking us over every yard of an exciting run. He uses homely English, but, every now and then, we get the deftly-turned phrase of a poet laureate, reminding us that this is not just another pony-book, written in verse for a change. He shows us the parson's daughter, Madge, snub-nosed 'with speckles of sandy eyebrows, sprinkled with freckles', and Molly Wolvesley, 'riding straddle, red as a rose with eyes like sparks', and the two college boys who try to get a smile from her—but fail. All the types are there, the old squire and the village doctor, farmers and grooms and poachers and school-children, the horsey-looking blonde woman with big teeth and 'stooks of hair (like polished brass)', and the two bright young girls on bicycles, who skilfully prop up their machines so that they at once fall over, and bring the parson's son to their assistance. Then the clock strikes, and in brilliantly vivid phrases the poet shows us the pack and the huntsmen, as 'down the road, the bob-bob-bobbing serpent flowed'. If you like the poem as far as that, you will enjoy the exciting second half, when the hounds begin to run.

Masefield paints his picture with everyday words. For a complete contrast—a richly-tinted picture, using words we may only half-comprehend, yet like for their sound and suggestion—here is Keats's *Eve of St. Agnes*. It is a romantic tale of elopement. Porphyro has crept up to Madeline's room. Before waking her, he sets out the kind of 'midnight feast' we all dream of, but which no sensible girl would stop to eat before escaping. In fact Madeline does not touch it, but prosaic common sense is not what matters in this kind of poem. We can enjoy the luscious syllables, if not the delicacies they describe:

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
In blanch'd linen, smooth, and lavender'd,
While he from forth the closet brought a heap
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one
From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

Sharing the Poet's Feelings

Another kind of poem tells neither a story nor paints a picture, though sometimes we may feel that we can fill in one of our own. Shall we say such poems create an atmosphere? Think of Coleridge's weird dream-fragment, *Kubla Khan*:

Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Or Thomas Hardy's:

When I set out for Lyonesse,
A hundred miles away. . . .

Who can say what *that* poem means, yet what a spell lies in its refrain! There is no story in Walter de la Mare's *The Listeners*:

'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door. . . .

A picture, perhaps, but more than a picture—a strange atmosphere which grips the reader until he feels something of the Traveller's own relief as he rode away from that derelict house of phantom listeners, and:

. . . the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.

Such poems work on our emotions in a special way, but there are many other feelings to be touched without the creation of any mysterious atmosphere. Sadness, for instance, at loss or the memory of past happiness. Byron's:

So we'll go no more a-roving
So late into the night. . . .

And the verses which I always link with his, prefacing A. E. Housman's *Last Poems*:

We'll to the woods no more,
The laurels all are cut. . . .

A happier note, of remembered friendship, is struck in William Cory's translation of a Greek poem by Callimachus:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remember'd how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

It is a great mistake to suppose that all serious poetry is sad. Wordsworth said it was 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'—and one can just as well remember happy emotions. He himself did in his verse-autobiography, *The Prelude*, when

he wrote of boyhood picnics and skating parties on the frozen lake. Think of the bubbling humour in Rupert Brooke's *Grantchester* or the exultant acceptance of Life in his *Great Lover* with its catalogue of good things as simple as hot water, 'friendly bread' and 'the cool kindliness of sheets'. The great point is that whatever emotion the poet is recollecting—triumph, tenderness, gaiety, anger—should be felt also by the reader. It is the special merit of good verse that, by its use of rhythm and other devices, it is better able to produce this effect than prose.

The Modern Poet is not Just Awkward

In all our long imaginary afternoons on the river, though I have chosen some poems by living authors, I have not (I do not know about *you*, of course) quoted any of those obscure difficult ones which are supposed to be typical of modern poetry. Wherever people argue on this subject you will hear it said that the average modern poet has no sense of beauty and so little to say that is fresh that he wraps it up in meaningless gibberish, in order to make us believe him clever. How far is this true?

First let us get rid of the idea that all recently written poems are ugly and hard to understand. Frederic Prokosch can write exquisite lyrics like *Evening*:

Pears from the boughs hung golden,
The street lay still and cool,
Children with books and satchels
Came sauntering home from school. . . .

W. H. Auden, whose *Night Mail* has already been quoted, can write:

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of sweetness show. . . .

And as for T. S. Eliot, who is regarded by some as the villain of the piece, who has started all this modern cult of queer,

over-intellectual verse, is he not also the author of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*?

Macavity's a Mystery Cat: he's called the Hidden Paw—
For he's the master criminal who can defy the Law.
He's the bafflement of Scotland Yard, the Flying Squad's
despair:
For when they reach the scene of crime—*Macavity's not
there!*

May we suggest then that the modern poets are really quite sane; nor are they being deliberately awkward. If they sometimes write poems much harder than these quoted, they may have a good reason.

The reason is perhaps, very shortly, that the world is a much more complicated place than the one Wordsworth and Tennyson knew. As we have already seen in considering the 'psychological' short story, people now know many things about the human heart and mind which earlier generations could not even guess at. No really deep writing, prose or verse, can ever be quite the same again. The working of a complicated machine cannot be described simply—one *has* to use certain technical terms. The modern poet is still struggling to digest the mass of scientific knowledge which has been thrust at him in this century, and to adjust himself to a world altered by war and revolution. Try explaining the three-speed gear on a bicycle to a boy of five: it cannot be done. For the same reason the modern poet cannot always make himself clear to the reader of fifteen—or even of fifty.

Some modern poetry can be enjoyed now. Some must be left until we have acquired more knowledge with which to understand it. Meanwhile, we have about five centuries of earlier English poetry to explore, not to mention translations. Enough to occupy us until we are twenty-one, or even older!

6

REAL PEOPLE

NOTHING IS MORE fascinating than the well-told life-story of a real person.

The popularity of such life-stories is well known to the editors of cheap Sunday newspapers and magazines. It is proved, too, by the listening-time which the B.B.C. allots to dramatized biography in its feature programmes, and to the frequency with which real persons of the past are made the subject of films. Often these broadcasts and films set us asking ourselves questions: Is it true? Was he really like that? Did that scene happen, or was it invented in the studio? Our hand may go out to the encyclopedia, as we switch off the radio, so that we can check at least the main outline of the story. For a brief hour the subject is intensely vivid for us. That is the time to visit the librarian and ask if there is a good biography of this person. And, when we realize that a book can give us just as much pleasure, in a different way, as the film or radio-feature, we shall be ready to explore the Biography shelves without waiting for some script-writer to arouse our interest.

We may be interested in people chiefly for what they did (Alexander the Great) or for what they *were*, in character (Doctor Johnson), or for both (Queen Elizabeth). We may like best to read of our characters when they are grown up and famous, like Pasteur in *The Microbe Man* by Eleanor Doorly:

Into the great Lecture Hall of the Sorbonne, the crowds came trooping: students, scientists, ministers of state, novelists, like the author of *Three Musketeers* and George Sand, a princess even, the general public. On the platform, Pasteur stood before them, grave yet energetic, his grey-green

eyes full of life. By his side were two flasks of famous shape—one with a long curved beak, the other straight.

Or we may like to read of them as unknown boys and girls.

The more he feared ghostly apparitions the more he forced himself to brave them. At Eton, having drawn a circle on the ground, and set fire to some alcohol in a saucer, which enveloped him in its bluish flame, he began his incantation: 'Demons of the air, and of fire. . . .' 'What on earth are you doing, Shelley?' said his Master, the solemn and magnificent Mr. At Bethel, interrupting him one day. 'Please, sir, I'm raising the devil. . . .'

A few pages further on in the book (*Ariel* by André Maurois) we hear how the future poet raised the devil in another sense when he was at Oxford—by writing a pamphlet entitled *The necessity of Atheism*, and sending it to many prominent people. He was summoned before the Dons, and the Dean questioned him 'in a rude, abrupt and insolent voice'.

'Do you choose to deny that this is your composition?'

'I refuse to reply.'

'Then you are expelled, and I desire that you will quit the college to-morrow morning at the very latest.'

An envelope sealed with the college seal was immediately handed to him by one of the Fellows. It contained the sentence of expulsion.

Shelley dashed back to Hogg's rooms, flung himself down on the sofa, and trembling with rage repeated 'Expelled! . . . Expelled!'

Soon we read that his impulsive young friend, Hogg, has got himself expelled too. After a few more pages—and just after his nineteenth birthday—Shelley elopes with a girl from boarding school. 'Next day the Edinburgh Mail Coach carried northwards these two young things whose united ages did not exceed thirty-five.' Few novels are so full of incident as *Ariel*.

Another remarkable boy was Gino Watkins, whose life story has been written by J. M. Scott. At school he was full of mischief. Once on a cadet field-day—

We were hidden on the top of a haystack and more or less surrounded by the enemy. I saw one of the umpires coming by and said, 'We must hide,' but just as the umpire passed Gino stood up and very obviously

started signalling. The umpire of course saw and shouted to say we were captured. 'Are we washed out, sir?' asked Gino, and having received 'Yes,' he turned to me with, 'Now you see we've got a whole holiday.' We went back to the deserted school and had a wonderful day. Gino spent most of it climbing various buildings. He was very keen on climbing and brilliant at it, much too good for me. I spent most of the time watching him and some of the things he did were almost too spectacular to watch. . . . He climbed round the Masters Tower, an incredibly difficult business; I have never heard of any one else who tried it.

And again:

There are other adventures which can only be briefly mentioned—as when Gino took French leave to go to the Wembley Exhibition and found himself in the same railway carriage as one of the masters; when he persuaded the pilot whom he met near Shoreham to take him up in an aeroplane to stunt and swoop low over the cricket fields where he ought to have been playing. . . . It is not surprising that he was never made a prefect. . . .

But at twenty he led a party to Edge Island in the Arctic Ocean, and at twenty-four, after expeditions to Labrador and Greenland, he was so famous that a cable could be addressed to him in three words: 'Watkins, Explorer, England'. People already bracketed him with men like Nansen, Scott, and Shackleton, but neither publicity nor honours turned his head. A year later, having led another expedition to survey the ice-cap of Greenland for possible air-bases, he went out one day alone in an Eskimo canoe—and never returned.

They searched till midnight when the northern lights appeared, wavering mysterious and beautiful above the hills which pointed to the stars. They searched all the next day.

But Gino Watkins had gone from the world in the full pride of his youth and self-sufficiency; gone cleanly out leaving no relic of mortality; leaving only the memory of a vivid life and a bright inspiration.

He was always appropriate, and it was right that none should see him dead.

Three Tests for a Biography

There are biographies to suit every interest—of soldiers, sailors, scientists, statesmen, saints, and spies. People have enjoyed reading biography since Tacitus wrote *Agricola* in

the first century A.D.—indeed, since Plato and Xenophon set down their first-hand memories of Socrates in Athens, over four hundred years before that. There are short, readable volumes especially written for boys and girls: good examples of these are Eleanor Doorly's scientific biographies, *Radium Woman* (Madame Curie), *The Insect Man* (Fabre), and *The Microbe Man* (Pasteur); Lorna Lewis's *Nansen* and *Leonardo the Inventor*; L. A. G. Strong's *Henry of Agincourt* and *The Man Who Asked Questions* (Socrates). There are longer, equally readable biographies intended for the unscholarly general reader of any age. These contain no footnotes or references, and concentrate on the story, filling in any gaps in what is known by drawing on the author's imagination. Then again there are the heavy, dry-as-dust tomes (from our point of view), which have checked every statement and considered every possibility, so that the thread of the story gets hopelessly tangled up in learned arguments—very worthy and necessary books if you are studying for a History degree, but not our idea of pure pleasure. Finally, there are the books which make the best of both worlds: they are scrupulously careful about their facts, and have authority for every event they describe, every remark quoted, but they are put together with all the charm and wit of the finest novel. That is first-class biography. When a person finds true pleasure in that type, it means that he or she has reached the realms of gold—and refined gold, at that.

There are three questions we may ask ourselves when we are deciding whether a particular biography is worth reading or not: 1. Is the subject important or interesting? 2. Is the book true? 3. Is it well written?

The first question need not worry us much. The old idea that people are interesting only if they hold high public positions has been thrown overboard long ago. The princes and prime ministers of fifty years ago may mean much less to us than some observant traveller, some quiet country parson, or some penniless artist who was ignored in his own day. Anybody's life-story can be well worth reading, provided that we can say 'yes' to our other two questions.

Is it True?

That is much harder to answer. If we read a life of Queen Elizabeth which said that she died in 1604 and that her husband never got over it, we should know what to think of *that* particular biography. But even the worst book would never contain such absurd mistakes. As a character remarks in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 'The truth is rarely pure and never simple'. The more conscientious kind of biographer searches for the truth so far as it can be discovered: it lurks in old letters, diaries, State papers, verbatim reports of trials, in books written by the character himself and by those who knew him, in wills and bills and even the counterfoils of a cheque-book. (One of Shelley's old cheque-books came to light a year or two ago, and was eagerly pounced on by those who seek every scrap of evidence about him.) Serious biography can be as exciting as detection, especially when there is some mystery in the life of the subject, some gap in time when we do not know where or what he was doing. The chase may lead the biographer all round the world. To see, for instance, the actual letters which Henry VIII wrote to Anne Boleyn, he would have to go to the Vatican. It is extraordinary how much the biographer *can* find out. We know exactly what Sir Walter Raleigh had in his pockets on that night in 1618 when he tried to escape by boat down the Thames: those who arrested him made a list (and an interesting list it is), just as a modern police-sergeant would have done. But it is equally extraordinary how much *we* cannot find out. No one knows, within seven years, when Anne Boleyn was born.

What is a biographer to do with an awkward blank like that? It depends what sort of a biographer he is.

If he is concerned with the truth and nothing but the truth, he must admit he does not know. He can then set out his evidence as far as it goes, and tell us what he thinks is most likely. There is an extremely good instance in John Harvey's *Henry Yevele*. Yevele was one of the greatest medieval architects, a contemporary of Chaucer, and as some of his masterpieces survive (at the Tower, in Westminster Abbey,

and in Canterbury Cathedral), a life-story is of interest to many people. Unfortunately, very little is known about him as a man, and the biography is often no more than intelligent guesswork. But it is honest guesswork, because the writer tells us what is certain and what he is merely deducing. His first chapter, 'Early Life and Surrounding Influences', covers ten pages, but it opens with the frank confession: 'There is hardly any direct evidence concerning the birth and upbringing of Henry Yevele, but from the known facts of his later life a few assumptions may be permitted'.

But what if the biographer wants above all to write a readable story, without cluttering his page with footnotes and explanations? To get on with the action, and show us the historical characters moving and talking before us, like actors on a stage?

What is he to do with Anne Boleyn, who may have been born in 1500—or in 1507? Is he to show us, at a certain point in the story, a girl of seventeen or a woman of twenty-four? And, when he comes to her secret wedding with Henry, is he to paint an autumn landscape or a spring? For nobody now alive knows whether it was late in 1532 or early in 1533.

We should always distrust the biographer who takes us right into the mind of his subject, as though that subject were the hero or heroine of a novel. When the person has left intimate letters or a secret diary, it may be possible to guess at his thoughts; and when somebody has obligingly noted down his remarks, as Boswell noted Johnson's, it may be possible to reconstruct his conversation. Seldom, though, are biographers so lucky.

John Palmer, in *Molière: His Life and Works*, deals wittily with authors who guess wildly, to make a vivid story:

It is a poor biographer who allows himself to be defeated by lack of evidence, and fancy has made remarkably free with the mother and step-mother of Molière. Marie Cressé could read and there was a Plutarch in the house. It was, therefore, from his mother that Molière inherited his love of books, and a leaning towards things of the mind. Marie Cressé was proud in linen and in costly but simple clothes. Her house was admirably furnished and richly hung. It was, therefore, from

Marie Cressé that he inherited his pleasure in the splendid costumes of the actor and the pageantry of the stage. Marie Cressé had in her room a small coffer, covered with needlework, in which she kept the christening robes of her children. She was, therefore, an affectionate mother of an unusual religious sensibility. It is a pleasant reconstruction. There is no evidence, however, that Marie Cressé ever read the Plutarch; the desire to dress well is not uncommon in the mothers of quite ordinary children; and it is scarcely surprising that the daughter and wife of an upholsterer should be well provided with furniture. The small coffer with the christening robe is intimate and engaging; but there was hardly a mother in Paris who did not possess just such a coffer, and could not lay her hand upon just such a robe in time of need. Children were frequent in those days.

That passage is worth re-reading slowly, not merely because it so clearly exposes the method of the 'popular' biographer but also because it is a good example of orderly balanced writing and the quality which we call *irony*. There are more ways than one of attacking something you disapprove of. You can be solemn and angry and eloquent—in which case you are apt to lose your temper, exaggerate the arguments on your own side, and make people laugh at you. It is usually safer if you can get them to laugh *with* you, by keeping your own emotion in check, understating your case, and being very polite to your opponent. John Palmer does not say, 'A good biographer should not invent what he does not know—it's scandalous!' Instead he begins—and we can almost see the twinkle in his eye, the shadow of a smile on his lips: 'It is a poor biographer who. . . .' Then in a series of balanced sentences he sets out the commonplace facts that are known and what a biographer *might* reconstruct from them. Note how the sentences balance, 'Marie Cressé . . . therefore . . . Marie Cressé . . . therefore. . . .' Next, very gently, using mild phrases like 'not uncommon', 'quite ordinary' and 'scarcely surprising', he shows just how worthless such guesswork is. With his last little sentence, 'Children were frequent in those days', he punctures any remaining conceit in the minds of such writers. Yet (and here is the diabolical skill of it) not an unkind word has been spoken throughout.

This is not to say we should never read vivid, imaginative

biography. It is merely that we should cultivate our judgment, and distinguish between research and guesswork. After all, we can enjoy *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and other Shakespearean plays without being misled in our historical thinking. We are forewarned that Shakespeare knew little history and was concerned chiefly with entertainment. So with historical novels and popular biography. Provided we go to them with our eyes open, primarily for entertainment, and aware that any dubious parts need to be checked from other books, there is no harm in them. The danger is when we do not use our critical faculty and think every statement is true if the book comes from the non-fiction shelves.

Even the most careful and scholarly biographies, of course, cannot be proved entirely true. The *facts* may be proved—but what about the explanations of those facts? Two men may write about Napoleon: they will agree on his dates, but not on his character. Two men may record an action of Queen Elizabeth: they may disagree completely on why she took it. As new evidence comes to light, and fresh theories are discussed, opinions change. Nowadays, English kings like John and Richard III who used to be dismissed so confidently as 'bad' or 'weak' in our old history-books, are coming out in a more favourable light. If it is hard to say that a particular biography is 'true' we can at least decide if it is honest. A biography is honest if it tells us, either in the course of the narrative or in a separate explanation, just which parts are certain fact and which are opinion or guesswork.

Is It Well Written?

We have seen, in earlier chapters, how much extra pleasure is provided by the style in which statements are made. In the case of biography, it may decide whether we read that particular book or not. If the subject is important, such as Queen Elizabeth or Napoleon, there will be many books, from which we shall try to choose the best for our purpose; one that is both reliable and readable—and perhaps a second and a third, to compare the different versions. Unless some special course of study compels us, we shall leave severely

alone all those old-fashioned, weighty tomes, written in pompous language and calculated to send any normal reader to sleep within fifteen minutes. If the subject is unimportant, we shall not trouble about him at all unless his life has been written in an attractive way.

All the biographies so far mentioned are well written in their various ways, but the author who really brought style to modern biography, and made it as readable and amusing as any novel, was Lytton Strachey. Look at the last long sentence in his *Queen Victoria*. Victoria is dying quietly, 'speechless and apparently insensible . . . yet, perhaps, in the secret chambers of consciousness, she had her thoughts, too'. He goes on:

Perhaps her fading mind called up once more the shadows of the past to float before it, and retraced, for the last time, the vanished visions of that long history—passing back and back, through the cloud of years, to older and ever older memories—to the spring woods at Osborne, so full of primroses for Lord Beaconsfield—to Lord Palmerston's queer clothes and high demeanour, and Albert's face under the green lamp, and Albert's first stag at Balmoral, and Albert in his blue and silver uniform, and the Baron coming in through a doorway, and Lord M. dreaming at Windsor with the rooks cawing in the elm-trees, and the Archbishop of Canterbury on his knees in the dawn, and the old King's turkey-cock ejaculations, and Uncle Leopold's soft voice at Claremont, and Lehzen with the globes, and her mother's feathers sweeping down towards her, and a great old repeater-watch of her father's in its tortoise-shell case, and a yellow rug, and some friendly flounces of sprigged muslin, and the trees and the grass at Kensington.

What a sentence! Yet, if we read it aloud with intelligence, we shall not get out of breath, so well is it punctuated; nor shall we lose track of the meaning because, for all its length, it is so simply constructed, with subject and main verbs (indeed the only verbs) put right at the front, like a locomotive and tender, drawing an apparently endless train of carriages in the shape of phrases. As the sentence unrolls before us, we get the idea. Though we have not read the whole book, and can only guess at Lord M., the Baron, Leopold, and Lehzen, we see the general design. The dying queen is going back to earlier and earlier memories, beyond

her various prime ministers and her long-dead husband to her first recollections as a child. Though a train *looks* endless, we wait confidently to see the guard's van. In this case the 'guard's van' is a yellow rug on the lawn—just the kind of thing a tiny child notices and never forgets. When we sight that, we know that neither memory, nor the sentence, nor the very book itself, can go much further. Everything is rounded off with the neatness and finality of art.

In fairness to Lytton Strachey it should be said, first, that his sentences are usually short and crisp—and that is why we can appreciate the musical flow of a long one now and again; secondly, that all these green lamps and blue uniforms, cawing rooks and kneeling archbishops, however imaginative they may sound, are not guesswork, for every detail occurs somewhere in the historical records of a time. (Seventy-five books or other sources are listed at the end.) Strachey's one great guess is that she remembered these particular things—and no one can ever prove him right or wrong. The guess may be justified, artistically, in so far as Strachey deliberately chose a list of persons and impressions which seemed most typical of her life and character. By stringing them together in a single sentence—and in reverse order of time—he was able to summarize all that had gone before in the previous two or three hundred pages. It is an inspired ending to the book.

The chief excellence of that quotation lies in its idea and construction, but the skilful use of individual words is also worth noticing. 'The old King's *turkey-cock* ejaculations', the contrast in 'queer clothes and high demeanour', the repetition in 'back and back' and 'older and ever older', and the sparing use of alliteration (most of us overdo it, because it is the one literary trick we can manage) in 'vanished visions' and 'friendly flounces'. If we had read no other line of Strachey, we could tell from these alone that he was a highly-skilled craftsman. And if his biography had been about some humble unknown of the same period, and not one of the greatest queens in history, we might still feel that the book would be just as well worth reading.

A Man's own Story

Autobiography—a man's life written by himself—has certain advantages and certain disadvantages compared with life-stories compiled by other hands. Obviously he knows more about his own actions than anyone else can find out. But he may not know so much about his motives and character, and the effect he has on other people. Again, he may not be willing to put down all he knows, so that, whereas the biography contains gaps due to ignorance, the autobiography may contain even bigger gaps for other reasons. The missing facts may not be to the writer's discredit—they may be very greatly to his credit, so much so that no man can modestly record them of himself. Or they may be facts which would give pain to other people mentioned in the book, or even lead to libel actions. The writer of an autobiography is always handicapped by knowing more than he is in a position to say. He is writing not of a bygone period but of his own age, in which he has got to go on living—unless, like some, he leaves an autobiography to be published only after his own death. Even then, he cannot overcome one difficulty: an autobiography can never be complete. No man can report his own last words.

In spite of these handicaps, hundreds of autobiographies are written, and a fair number of them are well worth reading. Benvenuto Cellini, the Renaissance artist and craftsman, opens the story of his own life with this assertion:

All men, whatever be their condition, who have done anything of merit, or which verily has a semblance of merit, if so be they are men of truth and good repute, should write the tale of their life with their own hand. Yet it were best they should not set out on so fine an enterprise till they have passed their fortieth year.

Benvenuto wrote his *Life* at fifty-eight; or rather, as he tells us, he found that it was taking up so much of his time that he dictated it to a boy of fourteen, while he got on with his work. He was a most versatile man—not merely an expert goldsmith, engraver and sculptor, but something of a musician and engineer. He was also an accomplished liar,

but so amusing a rascal that we may forgive him for the tall stories he has crammed into his book. Perhaps if he had worked like a modern autobiographer, conscientiously turning over old diaries and letters and newspaper-cuttings, he would have stuck closer to the truth—and given us a duller narrative. As it is, we can easily picture him working away in his studio, spinning wonderful yarns till the boy-secretary's eyes popped out and the quill ceased to move over the paper. This scene for instance—one of the many fights in which Benvenuto had figured, and always of course as the hero—has the true Falstaffian touch:

Still furious, I rushed to the stairs and, having reached the street, I found all the rest of the household assembled there, more than a dozen in all. One had an iron shovel, another carried a big iron pipe, others hammers, anvils, and sticks. Like a mad bull I rushed into their midst, knocked down four or five of them, and fell with them, but dealing dagger-thrusts all the time, now here, now there. Those who kept their feet pressed in on me as hard as they could, having at me with both hands with their hammers, their anvils, and their cudgels. But as God in His mercy sometimes intervenes, it so pleased Him that they did not do me, nor did I do them, the very least harm in the world. Only my cap was left on the field, and that my enemies bore off, each of them digging at it with his weapon—though they had fought shy of it before. Then they looked among their company for the dead and wounded; and, lo, every man of them was safe and sound!

The manuscript which the boy completed for him had its own adventures, and the life-story might easily have been lost to the world. It was jealously kept by a private family, and on a blank page at the beginning may still be read these words:

This most singular book was ever held in high esteem by my father, Signor Andrea Cavalcanti, of happy and to me most precious memory. He would never let anyone copy it, holding out even against the oft-repeated entreaties made to him by his Most Serene and Reverend Highness, the Prince Cardinal Leopold of Tuscany.

Fortunately a copy *was* made before the original 'apparently disappeared, like a book bewitched, from more than one library'—to turn up again, many years later, in a shop.

Sportsmen—And Others

Autobiographies are seldom written specially for young readers, though some may be of particular interest to them, such as autobiographies of Test cricketers and other famous sportsmen. It is seldom that such books have any great literary merit, but the incidents and personalities mentioned can be intensely interesting to those who follow the sport concerned. The best autobiographical writer on cricket is not a famous player but a sporting journalist, Neville Cardus, whose *Autobiography* tells of his life-long passion for the game. After this book you may like to go to its sequel, *Second Innings*, or back to his earlier *Days in the Sun* and *A Cricketer's Book*. As sport has not previously been referred to, this seems the moment to put in a word in praise of all those other volumes in which it is the main theme—not merely the biographies and autobiographies (such as Siegfried Sassoon's brilliant *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*), but all that wealth of fiction, essays, poems, and even plays, such as R. C. Sherriff's *Badger's Green* about a village cricket-match and Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy* about a boxer. George Borrow gives us an unforgettable fight in *Romany Rye*, Hugh Walpole a stirring Rugby match in *Jeremy at Crale*, and E. F. Benson an equally exciting game of cricket in *David Blaize* . . . but we could go on for ever, building up our anthology of 'sport in fiction', and this, after all, is a chapter on real-life stories.

One type of autobiography likely to interest us, as book-lovers, is that written by an author. If we have enjoyed his imaginative work, we may be eager to learn about the person behind the pen, after which we go back to his novels or poems with fresh understanding and pleasure. Those who have enjoyed Patricia Lynch's Irish tales, *The Turfcutter's Donkey* or *The Mad O'Haras*, should try her book, *A Storyteller's Childhood*. Sometimes, though, we are disillusioned, and our opinion of an author goes down, as some people's opinion of Trollope did, when his *Autobiography* disclosed his businesslike but unromantic methods:

It had at this time become my custom—and it still is my custom, though of late I have become a little lenient to myself—to write with my watch before me, and to require from myself two hundred and fifty words every quarter of an hour. I have found that the two hundred and fifty words have been forthcoming as regularly as my watch went.

Quite different is George Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Gissing was a late Victorian novelist, as unsuccessful as Trollope was successful. A brilliant boy at the grammar school (first in all England at one examination), he wrecked an equally brilliant career at the university by falling in love with the wrong kind of girl, and insisting on marrying her. After that he went through years of poverty and degradation. His novels were read and admired by the few; he was accepted as a friend and equal by such men as George Meredith and Thomas Hardy, James Barrie, and H. G. Wells; but the general public would not buy his books, and he refused to write down to the popular taste. Then, in a few weeks in 1901, when he had at last found some kind of happiness, he wrote the one little book which has lived and become a minor classic.

It is not the ordinary straightforward autobiography. Gissing was too reserved to push his own personality to the front. Also, there were many painful episodes in his past which he would not wish to publish. He therefore put his recollections together in a random, essay form, so that it is a book to dip into here and there. Some passages, dealing with topical questions and the politics of the Boer War period, are not very interesting now. Gissing pretended that the book was really the work of an imaginary novelist 'Henry Ryecroft', and that he, Gissing, had merely edited it after Ryecroft's death. Most people saw through the device at once. Whatever in the book was not descriptive of Gissing's own life at least depicted the life he would have liked to lead. Thus, 'Henry Ryecroft', having come into a little money after years of struggle, has retired to an idyllic cottage in the Devon that Gissing loved; but, as Gissing wrote wistfully of 'the green valley of the broadening Exe and the pine-clad ridge of Haldon', of 'orchards bursting into bloom', and of

'moorland brown with last year's heather', he was actually sitting in the South of France, exiled by his doctor from the scenes he thirsted for. And a year or two later he was dead, without ever having seen them again.

I first met that book when I was at school. I have read it over and over again since then, and I see more in it now, rather than less. But I liked it so much when I was sixteen that I would recommend anyone to try it when they approach that age, especially if they share 'Henry Ryecroft's' love of country walks, books, and tea in the winter firelight.

So much for authors. Here, for a change, is an artist's autobiography, that of Dame Laura Knight, and entitled *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, because of her fondness for painting ballet-dancers and circus-folk. This is no pompous volume. The style recaptures the mood of the moment. Listen to the young girl Laura, running home past the school which was later my own:

The other day when coming home from school with Norah Truman who lives on the Forest Road, it came on to rain and I said, 'It'll spoil my velvet dress' and Norah said, 'I should think it'd do it good.' That was just as we were passing the Boys' High School gates; sometimes if they were left open and no one there we used to go in and swing on their horizontal bars in the open shed just inside. I wish the boys left school at the same time we do, it would be such fun—they have to be in earlier too, whenever I'm going to School I see one of the Masters who is always late racing in with a bright red face, we call him the *Scarlet Runner* and laugh behind his back. . . .

Quite different is the style when she recalls her early struggles to become an artist:

. . . on canvas and in paint I would tell of what I had seen. Fuel was added to the flame of ambition, making it blaze. In a rage of impotence I tortured myself with the thought, 'Why have not I the power to do it now?' . . .

Every day's work became a voyage of discovery. I found out for myself that all shadows in sunlight are not blue, but sometimes warmer than the light itself; that they only looked blue when turned to the sky. I first realized this colour law while painting a girl in a pink frock in full sunlight. The shadow on the folds looked rosier than I could match with paint.

After reading a few chapters—the childhood in Nottingham and France, the young married life in a Yorkshire fishing-village, Holland, the fun of first visits to London and selling pictures at the Academy—we feel that if Dame Laura had never handled a paint-brush, she might have done extremely well with a pen.

7

DIARIES AND LETTERS

IN 1819, IN the quiet library of Magdalene College, Cambridge, a young man named John Smith stumbled upon a remarkable discovery. He was looking through a great collection of books and papers which had been left to the College on the death of an old member more than a century before. Nothing of outstanding interest was known about this personage. True, he had been rather a gay dog in his College days, in Cromwell's time, and there was still an entry in the register of a reprimand 'for having been scandalously overserved with drink the night before'. But clearly he had sobered down later, for he had become an efficient Secretary to the Navy, an M.P., and President of the Royal Society. His life, one would have said, had been respectable but unadventurous and there was no reason why his name should be long remembered.

Thanks to Smith's curiosity, ingenuity and patience, that fading name was destined to blaze out with a renown it had never enjoyed in its owner's lifetime. For, among all those books and papers, Smith found six small notebooks, apparently written in code. He set to work to decipher them. His work would have been easier had he realized that it was not an unknown code, invented by the writer, but an early form of shorthand, Shelton's, published in 1620. With infinite patience Smith worked at the code, poring over the fading ink on those ancient pages. The notebooks proved to be a diary, kept from 1 January 1660, to 31 May 1669. In it the writer had put down every petty detail of his life and all his innermost thoughts. When these were so private that he had shrunk from setting them down in English, he had used

phrases in French or Spanish, Latin or Greek. This trick, needless to say, did not make the deciphering any easier. Smith stuck to his task twelve and fourteen hours a day for three years, and in 1825 the first big selection from the notebooks was published. So, more than a century and a half after it was written, one of the English classics—Pepys's* Diary—was given to the world.

The man revealed by the Diary is very different from the dignified, periwigged gentleman in the oil-paintings which have come down to us. Here instead is that young Sam who drank rather too much as an undergraduate and, at twenty-three, married Elizabeth St. Michel, a lovely but penniless Huguenot girl of fifteen. When he begins his Diary they have been married four or five years. He has a post at the Navy Office, and is trying to settle down as a respectable Civil Servant. He is full of good resolutions, but always breaking them, and honest enough to say so in the Diary. Thus, on the 31 December 1661, he closes with these words: 'I have newly taken a solemn oath about abstaining from plays and wine . . .' but within twenty-four hours he is recording the events of New Year's Day: 'We went by coach to see the play of *The Spanish Curate*. . . .' He was firmer in his resolution against drinking—and with good reason. A few months before he had written:

—What at dinner and supper I drank, I know not how, of my own accord, so much wine, that I was even almost foxed, and my head ached all night: so home and to bed, without prayers, which I never did yet, since I came to the house, of a Sunday night: I being now so out of order that I durst not read prayers, for fear of being perceived by my servants in what case I was.

Before judging Pepys too harshly we should remember that he was writing in the first flush of the Restoration. Charles the Second had just come to the throne, and after the strict Puritan dictatorship there was a violent reaction in London society. Not only had cards and drink been frowned

*pronounced 'Peeeps'

on, but Christmas had been abolished, theatres closed, and sport discouraged. People were free now to enjoy themselves, and Pepys was not the only one to carry things too far occasionally. He was a believer, too, in the saying that 'you are only young once'.

The truth is, I do indulge myself a little the more in pleasure, knowing that this is the proper age of my life to do it; and out of my observation that most men that do thrive in the world do forget to take pleasure during the time that they are getting their estate, but reserve that till they have got one, and then it is too late for them to enjoy it.

That tremendous zest for life, combined with an eager curiosity about people, places, books plays, music, good food, scientific discovery, Court gossip, makes the Diary fascinating to read, and makes us ready to forgive its writer for all the weaknesses he so candidly admits. Who would not have been glad to accept an invitation to dine with him?

We had a fricasee of rabbits, and chickens, a leg of mutton boiled, three carps in a dish, a great dish of a side of lamb, a dish of roasted pigeons, a dish of four lobsters, three tarts, a lamprey pie, a most rare pie, a dish of anchovies, good wine of several sorts, and all things mighty noble, and to my great content.

Or to a party on Thanksgiving Day:

Mighty merry . . . till about twelve at night, flinging our fireworks, and burning one another, and the people over the way. And, at last, our business being 'most spent, we went into Mrs. Mercer's, and there mighty merry, smutting one another, with candle-grease and soot, till most of us were like devils.

Like most people of the period, Pepys was a regular church-goer, but not always from the best motives. He speaks often of sleeping through the sermons, and was more interested in looking at the congregation than in listening to the service.

That which I went chiefly to see was the young ladies of the schools, whereof there is great store. . . .

And on another Sunday he:

turned into St. Dunstan's church, where I heard an able sermon . . . and stood by a pretty, modest maid, whom I did labour to take by the hand; but she would not, but got further and further from me; and at last I could perceive her to take pins out of her pockets to prick me if I should touch her again—which, seeing, I did forbear, and was glad I did spy her design. And then I fell to gaze upon another pretty maid, in a pew close to me, and she on me. . . .

Despite these goings-on Pepys, as a seventeenth-century husband, still felt entitled to bully his wife a little.

My wife being dressed this day in fair hair did make me so mad, that I spoke not one word to her, though I was ready to burst with anger. After that, Creed and I into the Park, and walked, a most pleasant evening, and so took coach, and took up my wife, and in my way home discovered my trouble to my wife for her white locks, swearing several times, which I pray God forgive me for, and bending my fist, that I would not endure it. She, poor wretch, was surprised with it, and made me no answer all the way home; but there we parted, and I to the office late, and then home, and without supper to bed, vexed.

Sometimes it was the servants who were the victims of his wrath, though usually (for one reason or another) he repented afterwards.

Coming home, saw my door and hatch open, left so by Luce, our cook-maid, which so vexed me, that I did give her a kick in our entry, and offered a blow at her, and was seen doing so by Sir. W. Pen's footboy, which did vex me to the heart, because I know he will be telling their family of it.

And another time:

The boy failing to call us up as I commanded, I was angry and resolved to whip him for that, and many other faults, to-day. I bade Will get me a rod, and he and I called the boy up to one of the upper rooms of the Comptroller's house towards the garden, and there I reckoned all his faults and whipped him soundly; but the rods were so small that I fear they did not much hurt to him, but only to my arm, which I am already, within a quarter of an hour, not able to stir almost.

For those interested in history, the Diary is an absolute

gold-mine. Not only does it contain the fullest details about everyday life, but it includes eye-witness accounts of the Plague, the Great Fire, and the panic when the Dutch fleet sailed up the Thames and nearly captured London. On this last occasion Pepys took the precaution of sending his money down into the country, to be buried in a garden. Unfortunately, when the crisis was past, there was some doubt about the exact hiding-place.

Oct. 10th.— . . . And he being gone, and what company there was, my father and I with a dark lantern, it being now night, into the garden with my wife, and there went about our great work to dig up my gold. But, Lord, what a toss I was for some time in, that they could not justly tell where it was; that I began heartily to sweat, and be angry, that they should not agree better upon the place, and at last to fear that it was gone; but by and by poking with a spit, we found it, and then began with a spud to lift up the ground. But, good God! to see how sillily they did it, not half a foot under ground, and in the sight of the world from a hundred places, if anybody by accident were near at hand, and within sight of a neighbour's window: only my father says that he saw them all gone to church before he began the work, when he laid the money. But I was out of my wits almost, and the more from that, upon my lifting up the earth with the spud, I did discern that I had scattered the pieces of gold round about the ground among the grass and loose earth; and taking up the iron head-pieces wherein they were put, I perceived the earth was got among the gold, and wet, so that the bags were all rotten, and all the notes, that I could not tell what in the world to say to it, not knowing how to judge what was wanting, or what had been lost by Gibson in his coming down: which, all put together, did make me mad; and at last I was forced to take up the head-pieces, dirt and all, and as many of the scattered pieces as I could with the dirt discern by candle-light, and carry them up into my brother's chamber, and there lock them up till I had eat a little supper: and then, all people going to bed, W. Hewer and I did all alone, with several pails of water and besoms, at last wash the dirt off of the pieces, and parted the pieces and the dirt, and then began to tell them by a note which I had of the value of the whole, in my pocket; and to find that there was short above a hundred pieces: which did make me mad; and considering that the neighbour's house was so near that we could not possibly speak one to another in the garden at that place where the gold lay—especially my father being deaf—but they must know what we had been doing, I feared that they might in the night come and gather some pieces and prevent us the next morning; so W. Hewer and I out again about midnight, for it was now grown so late, and there by candle-light did make shift to gather forty-five pieces more. And so in, and to

cleanse them: and by this time it was past two in the morning; and so to bed, with my mind pretty quiet to think that I have recovered so many.

Oct. 11th.— . . . W. Hewer and I, with pails and a sieve, did lock ourselves into the garden, and there gather all the earth about the place into pails, and then sift those pails in one of the summer-houses, just as they do for diamonds in other parts of the world; and there, to our great content, did by nine o'clock make the last night's forty-five up to seventy-nine: so that we are come to about twenty or thirty of what I think the true number should be; and perhaps within less; and of them I may reasonably think that Mr. Gibson might lose some: so that I am pretty well satisfied that my loss is not great, and do bless God that place is so well. So do leave my father to make a second examination of the dirt; and my mind at rest in it, being but an accident: and so gives me some kind of content to remember how painful it is sometimes to keep money, as well as to get it, and how doubtful I was to keep it all night, and how to secure it to London: so got all my gold put up in bags.

Poor Pepys! He is not an heroic figure. He is continually getting frights of one sort and another.

Not being well, I betimes to bed. About eleven o'clock, knowing what money I have in the house, and hearing a noise, I began to sweat worse and worse, till I melted almost to water. I rang, and could not in half an hour make either of the wenches hear me; and this made me fear the more, lest they might be gagged; and then I began to think that there was some design in a stone being flung at the window over our stairs this evening, by which the thieves meant to try what looking there would be after them, and know our company. . . . At last Jane rose, and then I understand it was only the dog wants a lodging, and so made a noise.

How many of us can honestly say that we have never been afraid like that, at some time in our lives? And how many of us would have the fairness to set down the joke against ourselves in a diary? By all means let us enjoy a good laugh over his fright, but we should make a big mistake if we set him down as a contemptible coward. During the Plague, when King and Court, and every one else who could, fled from the infected city to the country, Pepys stuck to his post. He was afraid, but, having sent his wife and mother to safety, he himself remained in London.

His Diary has fascinated millions of readers. His characteristic style, so easy to imitate, has been parodied in hundreds

of school magazines and advertisements. He has inspired a delightful comedy, *And So To Bed*, by a modern author, J. B. Fagan, and he has been the special study of an historian, Arthur Bryant, whose books *Samuel Pepys: The Man in the Making*, *The Years of Peril*, and *The Saviour of the Navy*, are an admirable follow-up for those whose interest has been whetted by the Diary. They may also like to try, for comparison, the other famous diary of the period, which his friend John Evelyn kept for no less than sixty-five years.

Diaries to Dip Into

When young, we are often more concerned with keeping our own diaries than with reading other people's. Christmas brings us Schoolboy and Schoolgirl, Scout and Guide and B.O.P. Diaries, containing all kinds of information on sporting records, royal birthdays, and French irregular verbs, and blank spaces to fill with the doings of each day. I still possess one I kept throughout the year in which I became sixteen and I find it interesting (though nobody else might) to read of those long-forgotten football matches, visits to the theatre, and camping expeditions. No one, however, can be *quite* certain what interest future generations may not find in these youthful jottings so many of us make. Glance, for example, into the diary of thirteen-year-old Anne Clifford, writing in 1603:

About 10 o'clock King James was proclaimed in Cheapside by all the Council with great joy and triumph. I went to see and hear. . . . When the corpse of Queen Elizabeth had continued at Whitehall as the Council had thought fit, it was carried with great solemnity to Westminster, the lords and ladies going on foot to attend it, my Mother and my Aunt of Warwick being mourners, but I was not allowed to be one, because I was not high enough—which did much trouble me then.

Or into that of George Gissing, mentioned earlier, but here a schoolboy, also of thirteen, during the Franco-Prussian War:

12th Sept. 1870, Monday. Went to school. Ward, who blew his face up with sodium, and Poppleton, who fell off a pear-tree, have not come yet.

I hope they will to-morrow. The boys are still getting on with mumps. The Prussians are still approaching Paris. Nothing else of consequence.

Our diary may never be printed. Anne Clifford's did not see the light of day until 1923 (*The Diary of the Lady Anne Clifford*, edited by V. Sackville-West), and Gissing's is merely quoted in the *Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, published long after his death. Perhaps, like Pepys, we do not want any one to read our diary. This fact remains: if we have kept one ourselves, we are more likely to appreciate others which have been published. It is, though, a taste which grows as we get older, and—except for Pepys who is in a class by himself—diaries are for young readers to dip into rather than devour. In any case, many of them are not published in full, and we find them quoted in other books, such as biographies.

Here is Gino Watkins, keeping his diary in Greenland:

We shall have to kill one of the dogs if we do not get somewhere to-morrow. It promises to be a merry Christmas. Half a candle for the Christmas tree and boiled dog instead of turkey.

And Captain Scott, facing a far worse situation at the South Pole, writing with numbed fingers:

Wednesday, January 17. The Pole. . . . Now for the run home and a desperate struggle. I wonder if we can do it. Feb. 24th. It is great luck having the horsemeat to add to our ration. Feb. 29th. Every day we have been ready to start for our depot 11 miles away but outside the door of the tent it remains a scene of whirling drift. . . . We are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more. R. Scott. For God's sake look after our people.

Nowhere does a man so truly reveal himself as in his diary—and Pepys is not the only kind of man.

Those who think of Byron as a cripple, and of poets as weedy, ineffective creatures, might look at his Journal:

I have been sparring with Jackson for exercise this morning. . . . My chest, and arms, and wind are in very good plight, and I am not in flesh. I used to be a hard hitter, and my arms are very long for my height (5 feet 8½ inches). At any rate, exercise is good, and this the severest of all; fencing and the broadsword never fatigued me half so much.

And those who think of him as heartless, from his treatment of some human beings, should read:

The last bird I ever fired at was an eaglet, on the shore of the Gulf of Lepanto . . . It was only wounded, and I tried to save it, the eye was so bright; but it pined and died in a few days; and I never did since, and never will, attempt the death of another bird.

An interesting sidelight on another great poet is given in his sister's diary, the *Journals* of Dorothy Wordsworth, which Helen Ashton used so skilfully in her historical novel, *William and Dorothy*. Most of us have read the poem beginning:

[I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils. . . .]

It is interesting to read her account of that walk:

It was a threatening, misty morning, but mild. . . . The lake was rough. There was a boat floating by itself in the middle of the bay. . . . We got over into a field to avoid some cows. . . . When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. . . . As we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful. They grew among the mossy stones about and above them; some rested their heads upon these stones, as on a pillow, for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake: they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing.

How closely this agrees with her brother's verse:

They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee . . .

Poor faithful Dorothy! She wrote down all his poems for him when he had composed them in his head, and tramped so

many miles with him, and her reward was that first line, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'.

Other People's Letters

Few people keep diaries for long. We all write letters off and on, throughout our lives. We are taught when young that it is bad manners (and often worse than that) to 'read other people's letters', but this excellent rule does not apply when we have been given permission. So long as the writer is alive, it is for him to say whether his letters to private individuals may be published, and when he is dead, this control is exercised by his heirs. Thus many of the most interesting letters—which give away secrets or contain really uncomplimentary statements, for example—do not get published until they are bygone history. For that reason books of letters will always, on the whole, appeal more to grandfathers than to their grandsons. The grandfathers are that much closer to the letter-writer, and are eager to learn the truth (now at last being revealed) about persons and happenings which were in the public eye when *they* were boys.

But some letters are just as interesting to us when we are young. Any one can appreciate the quality of this letter, written by Sir Walter Raleigh to his wife as he awaited execution on a false charge (He was not, in fact, executed until fifteen years later.):

You shall nowe receive (my dear Wife) my last Wordes in these my last lines. My love I send you that you may keep it when I am Dead, and my Counsell, that you may remember it when I am no more. I would not by my will present you with sorrows, dear Bess, let them into the Grave with me and be buried in the dust: And seeing it is not the Will of God that ever I shall see you more in this Life, bear it patiently and with a heart like thy selfe.

First I send you all the thanks which my heart can conceive, or my Wordes can express, for your manie travels* and care taken for me; which though they have not taken effect as you wished, yet my Debt to you is not the less; but pay it I never shall in this World.

Secondly, I beseeche you for the love you bear me Living, do not hide your selfe many Days after my Death, but by your Travels seek to help

your miserable Fortunes and the Right of your poor Child. Thy Mournings cannot avayl me, I am but Dust.

Remember your poore Child, for his Father's sake; who chose you and loved you in the happiest time. Get those Letters, if it be possible, which I writt to the Lords, wherein I sued for my Life. God is my witness, it was for you and yours that I desired Lyfe; but it is true that I disdain my selfe for begging it, for know it, dear Wife, that your Son is the son of a true man, and one who in his own respect despiseth Death, and all his misshapen and ugly Formes. I cannot write much: God he knoweth how hardly I steal this Time, while others sleep; and it is also high time that I should separate my Thoughts from the world. Beg my dead Bodye which living was denied thee; and either lay it at Shirburne (if the Land continue) or in Exeter church by my Father and Mother: I can say no more, Time and Death call me away.

'Time and Death call me away. . . .' In that last phrase is something of the flourish with which the greatest Elizabethans lived and died—a sort of sense of the theatre, yet applied to real life, which never deserted them even in their worst hour. Sir Walter had this quality to a degree. (Lacking a precise word to express it in English, we sometimes borrow the French one, *panache*.) He displayed it in gesture and word alike. The famous story of the cloak and the puddle may not be true, but others are. He could joke about his own execution. 'Come early then and make sure of a good place', he advised a friend the day before, 'For my part, I *am* sure of one.' And, when he mounted the scaffold, his reported words are better than a playwright could have written for him. Feeling the axe-edge he smiled and said: 'This is a sharp medicine to cure all my diseases.' And refusing the offer to be blindfold he answered proudly: 'Do you think I fear the shadow of the axe, when I do not fear the axe itself?' The private letters of such a character are especially interesting because they serve as a check on his sincerity. Public behaviour may be 'for effect', but a man's farewell to his wife is written from the heart. Sir Walter's—like other letters of his we possess—shows that his *panache* was a genuine part of his personality.

The publication of letters is a very ancient practice. Perhaps it is not fair to count St. Paul's Epistles in the New

Testament, since they are not private letters though there are many flashes of the writer's personality in them. The letters of the Roman, Pliny, date from the same period, and read much more like modern letters, though in fact they were written and polished up with an eye to publication. The most interesting of them give an eye-witness account of that volcanic eruption which destroyed Pompeii. Pliny was there, as a boy of eighteen, and his uncle, an admiral, was suffocated while supervising the rescue operations. Most of the other letters will interest only those who study Roman history, and the same can be said of Cicero's, written a century and a half before, in the time of Julius Caesar. But Cicero's were at least genuine, natural private letters, in which he unlocked his heart to his friends without any idea that they would be published.

From the Middle Ages onwards we have an ever-increasing flood of correspondence. Some of us will remember Henry V's challenge to the Dauphin in Shakespeare's play, but how many know the actual letter in which it was made?

Henry by the grace of God King of France and England, Lord of Ireland, to the high and mighty prince, the Dauphin of Vienne, our cousin, eldest son to the very powerful prince, our cousin and adversary of France. Whereas, from reverence to God, and to avoid the shedding of human blood, we have many times and in many ways sued and sought for peace, and have not been able to obtain it. . . . And well considering that our wars occasion the death of men, the desolation of countries, the lamentations of women and children, and so many evils in the general, as every good Christian ought to mourn and have pity on them . . . we offer you to decide this our quarrel, with God's grace, by combat between our person and yours.

This kind of thing can be fascinating to read, but (let us be quite honest) a little goes a long way unless we are specializing in history. Some of the most readable letters are not those which pass between kings and other eminent persons (Henry VIII's love-letters are disappointing), but those which were written by ordinary merchants and yeomen and their families as soon as writing became general. The golden age is the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here is a letter young

Christopher Wren wrote to Faith Coghill when they were courting. She had dropped her watch in the sea, and had asked him to get it put right for her.

Madam,

The artificer having never before mett with a drowned Watch, like an ignorant physician has been soe long about the cure that he hath made me very unquiet that your commands should be soe long deferred; however, I have sent the watch at last and envie the felicity of it, that it should be soe neer your side, and soe often enjoy your Eye, and be consulted by you how your Time shall passe while you employ your hand in your excellent workes. But have a care of it, for I put such a Spell into it that every Beating of the Ballance will tell you 'tis the pulse of my Heart which labours as much to serve you and more Trewly than the watch; for the watch I believe will sometimes lie, and sometimes perhaps be idle and unwilling to goe, having received so much injury by being drenched in that briny bath, that I dispair it should ever be a Trew Servant to you more. But as for me (unless you drown me too in my Teares) you may be confident I shall never cease to be,

Your most affectionate, humble servant,

Chr. Wren.

People often say that the art of letter-writing has been killed by the speed of modern life, which leaves little time for leisurely composition. More particularly it has been killed by such inventions as the picture postcard, which makes it unnecessary to write long descriptions of the places we see on our travels, and the telephone, which often makes it unnecessary to write at all. Some people blame the introduction of the postage stamp in 1840. Before that date, the person who received the letter had to pay the postage, not the sender, and the charge varied according to the distance. Put yourself in the position of a Londoner, writing to Aberdeen, and knowing that his friend would have to pay one-and-fivepence before the postman would hand over the letter! Either you would be afraid to write at all, or you would take good care that your letter was *worth* one-and-fivepence, by making it as long, interesting, and amusing as possible. Once the postage-stamp was invented (and until the first World War letters went for a penny), people could send off as many hurried scribbles as they liked.

But is the art of letter-writing really dead? Is it worth keeping alive? The answers to those questions rest partly with us. We may not have so much time as our ancestors had to polish our letters, but we have some. The telephone is very handy for practical arrangements—but people who use it to unburden their souls to each other are a menace to society. Snapshots and picture postcards may have rendered long descriptive passages unnecessary—but were they ever the most important, the most welcome, parts of the letter? Except, perhaps, when the writer is a master-craftsman, like the poet and novelist D. H. Lawrence writing from a cottage in Derbyshire to his fellow-author, Katherine Mansfield:

It is marvellous weather—brilliant sunshine on the snow, clear as summer, slightly golden sun, distance lit up. But it is immensely cold—everything frozen solid—milk, mustard, everything. Yesterday I went out for a real walk—I've had a cold and been in bed. I climbed with my niece to the bare top of the hills. Wonderful it is to see the foot-marks on the snow—beautiful ropes of rabbit-prints, trailing away over the brows; heavy hare-marks; a fox, so sharp and dainty going over the wall; birds with two feet that hop; very splendid straight advance of a pheasant; wood-pigeons that are clumsy and move in flocks; splendid little leaping marks of weasels, coming along like a necklace chain of berries; it is astonishing what a world of wild creatures one feels round one, on the hills in the snow. From the height it is very beautiful. The upland is naked, white like silver, and moving far into the distance, strange and muscular, with gleams like skin. Only the wind surprises one, invisibly cold; the sun lies bright on a field, like the movement of a sleeper. It is strange how insignificant in all this life seems. Two men, tiny as dots, move from a farm on a snow slope, carrying hay to the beasts. Every moment they seem to melt like insignificant spots of dust; the sheer, living, muscular white of the uplands absorbs everything. Only there is a tiny clump of trees bare on the hill-top—small beeches—writhing like iron in the blue sky.

Neither telephone nor picture postcard could have done what that letter does. So long as letters like that can be written in the twentieth century, we shall have collections to publish worthy of comparison with those of the past.

8

THE ARMCHAIR TRAVELLER

'SEE EUROPE FROM an armchair', some travel agents invite us, displaying photographs of luxuriously-upholstered motor-coaches. No doubt there are people who like to see Europe that way, lolling back against a comfortable headrest and watching the Alps or Mediterranean flash by through the dusty plate-glass window. Personally, I should hate it. For getting from one place to another, planes and trains and coaches are useful. But for seeing the country, they simply do not compare with the slower modes of travel—the horse, the bicycle, and the human foot. My own eyes, I know, are like those of a doll, only fully open when I am in a vertical position.

There is another kind of armchair travel. It costs nothing, for the armchair waits at home, and the only ticket needed is marked *Non-Fiction*, free from every public library. We need no passport. Frontier difficulties do not exist. In imagination we can cross the forbidden areas of Central Asia, explore the Brazilian jungle, attack the Arctic.

Yet it is extraordinary how few boys and girls realize the enjoyment which lies waiting inside the pages of a travel-book. One sees them in libraries, vainly scouring the Fiction shelves for an adventure-story they have not read—and sometimes leaving empty-handed, disappointed, without even a glance at the Travel section. They do not realize that some of the finest adventure-stories in the world have been written by the men who have *lived* those same adventures, and distilled their books out of months and years of first-hand danger and hardship.

From the dawn of literature, people have loved the travel-

story. What is Homer's great poem, the *Odyssey*, but a very tall story of wanderings between the Black Sea and Sicily? And when, some centuries later, another Greek named Herodotus wrote the book which has won him the nickname, 'Father of History', was not half its popularity due rather to his first-hand knowledge of geography? For Herodotus was about as widely-travelled a man as lived in the fifth century B.C. He had been north to the Crimea, south to the Sudan, west to Italy and Sicily, and east as far as Persia. Whatever interested him on those journeys, he put into his book, whether connected with the theme or not—and his public loved it. He told them how, in Assyrian villages, unmarried girls were auctioned every year:

The auctioneer would then get up and offer them in turn, beginning with the prettiest; when she had fetched a big price, he put up the next prettiest, all the girls being sold as lawful brides. Rich Assyrians who wanted to marry would bid against each other for the best-looking. Ordinary men, who were anxious to get married but did not care so much about beauty, could take the plainer girls and a cash compensation. For when the auctioneer had sold all the prettiest, he would put up the ugliest of the lot, or perhaps a cripple, and offer her to whichever man would marry her for the least payment. . . . The money came from the price paid for the good-looking ones, who in this way paid for the dowry of the ugly and crippled.

Herodotus thought this was the wisest of all the Assyrian customs, and no doubt many of his Greek readers (especially those who had ugly daughters to dispose of) heartily agreed with him. The Greeks were not romantic about love between the sexes.

Herodotus was not always careful to check his statements—he did not pretend to have seen everything himself. He tells of ants in the Indian desert, 'bigger than foxes', but he was not prepared to swallow every story brought him—he had doubts, for instance, about a report that Northern Europe contained a race of one-eyed men, rich in gold which they stole from griffins. But it certainly is hard to decide how much of Herodotus belongs to the Non-Fiction shelves, and the same applies to medieval authors such as Sir John Mande-

ville. Marco Polo, on the other hand, told the truth about his amazing journey to China, and was called a liar for his pains. And when Raleigh wrote of his visit to Guiana his enemies declared that he had never even been there, that he had been hiding in Cornwall throughout the supposed voyage, and that his samples of metallic ores came from no further west than the local tin-mines. Most Elizabethan readers, however, were not so incredulous. There was an eager public for his story, and for the many other equally genuine narratives of the English voyagers. They were collected by his old Oxford friend, Hakluyt, whose *Voyages* rank to-day among the classics of travel-literature.

In later centuries, travel-books became still more reliable. As a boy I particularly liked Cook's *Voyages of Discovery*—to Australia, New Zealand, and the South Sea Islands, and Anson's *Voyage Round the World*. Both these classic stories are in the Everyman Library, along with Mungo Park's *Travels*, Speke's *Discovery of the Source of the Nile*, and Franklin's *Journey to the Polar Sea*.

Looking at such books, which hark back to the days when nobody *knew* where the Nile rose, nobody had *been* to the Pole, and New Zealand was a new shape on a blank part of the map, modern readers may raise two objections. 'It's all right,' they may say, 'but it's stale now, and you can't expect *us* to be interested. Some of these books are written in a long-winded old-fashioned style. And exploring is finished now—somebody's been everywhere except the top of Everest, and even that's been flown over.'

Let us look at the first objection. True, some of the old travel-books consist of good stories buried under a style which does not attract the impatient modern reader. Why should it? They were not written for him. That does not mean that they should be thrown aside as dead and done for, but only that they should be postponed until we have trained our taste on something easier.

We can do this by reading some of the excellent accounts of those same travels which have been written by living authors with a special eye to our tastes. A good sample is

given in Mary Seymour Lucas's *Vast Horizons* where, along with attractive pictures, coloured maps and even the music of the songs some of the exploring parties used to sing, we find brief lively accounts of various explorations from the Crusaders to the eighteenth century. If these whet our appetite, we can turn to longer narratives in semi-story form—to L. A. Kent's *He Went with Marco Polo* (and her similar books on Columbus, Magellan, and Vasco da Gama), Ronald Syme's *Hakluyt's Sea Stories*, Aubrey de Selincourt's retelling of Captain Cook's adventures in *Mr. Oram's Story*, and C. Walter Hodges's beautifully-written, beautifully-illustrated *Columbus Sails*. Here is a sample from the last-mentioned book. The crew, weary of sailing ever westwards to the unknown rim of the world, are murmuring threats of mutiny:

Again in the increasing darkness, the confusion of voices joined from all sides, and argument swelled up. Over all was Sancho's voice insisting upon action, a quick decision, no more delay. Another day of—

'Almighty! What was that! . . .'

Like the hand of death, silence came down suddenly. Not a breath was uttered, not a finger stirred. Someone stole cautiously to the hatch and opened it and stood listening. . . .

Again! The sound of cannon! Far off, but not to be mistaken, the thud of gunshot! Shouting on deck, feet running! Quick! Up the ladder! Get out of here! Crowding the hatchway, we bruise our shoulders, our knees, push through into the open. 'The *Pinta*! The *Pinta*! They've sighted land!'

From her three masts, the *Pinta* breaks out her flags. The gunsmoke still hangs like a mist along her side, and from her decks, distantly, comes the sound of cheering. At the high stern, a little figure—it must be Pinzon—gestures wildly to us towards the south-west. Clambering up, clinging to the shrouds, we gaze into the distance, shielding our eyes against the broad, red sunset. And then we see it.

'Land!'

We cheer like madmen and wave our caps. There, there is the land, showing more clearly with every moment of the sinking sun; a low shoreline, a chain of hills and one bluff mountain beyond, waiting in serenity for our approach, standing out now in darker silhouette as the sun touches the water, and darker still as it goes in. Until the last eclipse of the last red fragment of the sun's disc, we watch that constant shore. Then comes the admiral's voice:

'Men to the deck! Let us give thanks to God!'

Kneeling on the boards we sang, as with one voice, the 'Gloria in Excelsis.' Then—

'Stand by, lads! Bartolomeo, we'll shorten sail and bring her around close hauled upon the port tack. Make for the land!'

Once more the cheering and then to work, to the squeal of tackle running in the blocks. As night closed in, the fleet was upon its new course. Slowly, cautiously, we advanced, all very quiet now, watching. Upon the thwarts, a man stood sounding our depth. Intermittently through the darkness came the splash of his lead, the long pause, the monotonous cry: 'No bottom yet!'

The night wore on. None slept. Very slowly upon the poop, the Admiral walked back and forth. Sometimes, we talked in low voices, but mostly kept silent, a silence pierced only at intervals by that same cry: 'No bottom yet!'

The night wore on in deeper silence. At last the East lightened and greyness came. Over the sea as daylight grew slowly, so very slowly, a mist, like a web of thin white smoke, rose up. We took in more sail. The voices of command from the other ships came wailing drearily through the fog. The Admiral cupped his hands and called up to the masthead: 'Hola up, there! Anything?' 'Nothing yet, señor!' came the faint answer. And, like a refrain from below, the other cry: 'No bottom yet!'

After an endless while came the sun, and, like a wind, it lifted the mist and swept it back. Even as we watched, the sea grew clear, revealing first our two consort ships, their gunwales lined with men, and then away beyond them until the whole scene stood revealed.

A scene of emptiness. No land, not any sign of it. Only the same perpetual sea, the empty horizon.

We made no sound, no movement, only gazed. Dull, leaden, vacant apathy sat heavily upon our minds and bodies. Like us, the Admiral stood unmoving, and looked upon his desolation. Like us he made no sound. But down his stiff face ran a bright channel of tears.

Then, at last, as if from nowhere, came a voice. Barely more than a whisper, it closed like the bang of a door the last syllable of hope. The voice said:

'It was nothing but the clouds—and the sunset.'

Modern retellings are not a substitute for the original narratives, but they bring the people to life for us, so that we turn with more interest to the actual story they told at the time.

Now for the second objection, that in the modern world there is nothing left to discover. 'There are no more unvisited, forbidden cities or unapproached high mountains or unrecorded great rivers', wrote John Buchan in *The Last Secrets*—yet only a year or two ago Frank Smythe, the famous climber, could write in *The Times* of 'tens of thousands of square miles of wild mountainous country unmapped and unexplored',

and this area was not in forbidden Tibet but in British Columbia, adjoining the Alaska Highway! Perhaps even we may yet find truth in the story J. Leslie Mitchell told in a fascinating little book called *Hanno, or The Future of Exploration*.

There is an Indian-Esquimaux legendary land in these Northern wastes—an Amerindian Avalon, a valley deep in the mountain-blocks, shut-off, secure, with unfreezing rivers and mighty trees. Lone miners and trappers have heard of it; they say that the mammoth still browses in its hidden woods. In 1926 a remarkable experience in these latitudes befell Colonel Williams, one of the aviators of the American Survey, and his mechanic, Caldwell. Flying over unfamiliar country in rough and foggy weather they had been watching the mountain serrations below them, bare, snow-split, jagged, with the dun tundra swamps interspersing. Suddenly, in the racing mountain-edges below them, leapt to view a wide valley, tree-covered, with the glint of running water. For an amazing moment they saw it, then the mist blotted it out.

Whether or not such reports are true (and that other one about a peak in Western China, 'higher than Everest', made by another American airman during the Second World War), travel still has its adventures and surprises. C. E. Key's *Book of Recent Exploration*, based on the proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society, gives some idea of what is being done, and what is left to do.

Our taste in travel books will depend partly on the countries in which we are specially interested. Some like to do their 'armchair travel' in the Amazonian jungles; others hanker for the upland steppes of Central Asia or the *Black River of Tibet*, the title of a book by a young modern adventurer (John Hanbury-Tracy) and others again are allured by the Poles. Many readers, however, are more concerned with the quality of the writing, and are prepared to journey anywhere, in imagination, if their invisible companion, the author, talks well.

Frank Smythe's *The Kangchenjunga Adventure* is a modern classic of Himalayan climbing, though some may prefer to start with the *Adventures of a Mountaineer*, in which he tells how his love of heights was born when 'at the age of seven . . . I

climbed my first mountain, a grassy peak in the Bernese Oberland'. F. Kingdon-Ward, another Himalayan traveller, is more interested in discovering new plants than in scaling new peaks, but he has a keen eye for the scenery, and a vivid pen with which to describe it, as in *Burma's Icy Mountains*:

The view eastwards was terrifying in its dark grandeur. We stood on the sharp edge of a gigantic cliff, and far below us was the invisible Dablu river, here no more than a torrent. Of pass in any sense of the word there was no visible trace, nor any way down the precipice; it was a parachute jump. Eastwards less than 5 miles away across the Dablu valley a range of spiky rock peaks rose out of the forest and jabbed the sky. Everywhere one looked the same terrific landscape met the eye; the whole horizon was pricked with peaks like some celestial city of towers and spires, over which frothed the grey monsoon clouds. I could see no village below; it was a savage land, tilted on edge. Such then was the Mungu Hkyet.

Notice his choice of words. The peaks 'jab the sky' and 'prick the horizon', the land is 'tilted on edge', not just sloping steeply, and the clouds do not drift or pour, they 'froth'. Clearly he has not been satisfied with obvious words and comparisons which spring most easily to mind, he has searched and selected, in an effort to give us a picture of a really unusual, frightening panorama. This is first-class descriptive writing, such as a travel book ought to contain, if it is to stand out among all the hundreds published.

One of the most readable travel-writers to-day is Peter Fleming. He is, I suppose, closer to the 'amateur' adventurers of fiction, for he is not a specialist in the sense that Smythe was a climber and Kingdon-Ward a botanist. In *News from Tartary* Fleming describes a journey he made from Peking to Kashmir, round the back (so to speak) of the Tibetan plateau and through the almost equally forbidden land of Sinkiang, into India—not so much through the 'back door' of that country as through the 'sky-light' in the roof. Experts and officials were agreed on the impossibility of the journey, but this was only an additional challenge to the streak of sheer cussedness in the author's character.

One remarkable thing happened at the outset. Someone else was planning the very same trip—and they found them-

selves competing for the only available guides. The other person was a Swiss girl, Ella Maillart, also a writer. Her latest book had been entitled *Turkistan Solo*, whereas Fleming's had been called *One's Company*. Both wished to go alone, but neither would back out, so at last they set off good-humouredly together. The result was two good books (Ella Maillart's is called *Forbidden Journey*) so that we can compare the girl's view and the man's of the same adventure.

Fleming's distinctive quality is his sense of humour, his habit of ironical understatement, his refusal to pose as any sort of adventurer. (We have to read carefully between the lines to realize that he must often have been in danger, for he describes his wanderings as urbanely as though they had been a mere walk in the park.) He pokes fun at the old-style travel book with its heroic exaggerations, its dramatic attitudes, and its favourite words and phrases. This element of parody is particularly strong in his first book, *Brazilian Adventure*. This describes a very amateurish expedition in search of the English Colonel Fawcett, who had set off with the confident plan of discovering a lost civilization in the heart of South America. Here, we might say, is raw material for a most exciting book, worthy to rank with such fiction as Conan Doyle's *Lost World* or the most fantastic comic strip. In Fleming's hands it becomes something much more original. The search failed, as all searches for Fawcett have failed. The party quarrelled and split. Drama turns to comedy, comedy to farce, and the latter part of the book is taken up by an absurd (yet still exciting) boat-race down the Amazon with Fleming's party straining every nerve to reach civilization before the others. To find out why, and whether they were successful, you must read the book itself.

Fleming can write a serious description as well as anybody. Here is his account of a fire on the Brazilian campo. He has climbed a tree to get a longer view across the flat country.

A wind began to sing in the sparse leaves round my observation post. The sky darkened. Massed black cohorts of clouds assembled in the west and came up across the sky under streaming pennons. The wind rose till its voice was a scream; great weals appeared in the upstanding grass, and

in the straining thickets the undersides of leaves showed pale and quivering in panic. My tree groaned and bent and trembled. The sky grew darker still.

The earth was ablaze. That fire which the Indians had lit raced forward under the trampling clouds, and behind me, on the other side of the river, a long battle-line of flames was leaping out across the campo we had fired that morning. Huge clouds of smoke charged down the wind, twisting tormented plumes of yellow and black and grey. The air was full of fleeting shreds of burnt stuff. The fall of sparks threw out little skirmishing fires before the main body of the flames. A dead tree close beside me went up with a roar while the fire was still half a mile away.

And here, by way of contrast, is his ironical description of something quite different. He is standing in a Brazilian city, gazing up at a mass of highly-symbolical sculpture.

Victory has got a half-Nelson on Liberty from behind. Liberty is giving away about half a ton, and also carrying weight in the shape of a dying President and a brace of cherubs. (One of the cherubs is doing a cartwheel on the dying President's head, while the other, scarcely less considerate, attempts to pull his trousers off.) Meanwhile an unclothed male figure, probably symbolical, unquestionably winged, and carrying in one hand a model railway, is in the very act of delivering a running kick at the two struggling ladies, from whose drapery on the opposite side an eagle is escaping, apparently unnoticed. Around the feet of these gigantic principals all is bustle and confusion. Cavalry are charging, aboriginals are being emancipated, and liners launched.

Travel-writers are not interesting *only* when they recount heroic adventures in primitive countries. Once that is realized, whole new shelves of books are thrown open to our possible enjoyment.

Nearer Home

The story of a really exciting journey, such as a dash for the South Pole or a pilgrimage to Mecca in disguise, is readable even when the teller is not a brilliant writer. When we turn, though, to journeys which almost any one might make, the style—through which shines the personality of the traveller—becomes much more important, if, that is, we are reading for pleasure rather than information. For, once we turn from books about wild far-off places to those on Britain or other countries not far away, we know that some day we

may be able to leave our armchairs and go to see these imagined landscapes for ourselves.

Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey* for example is read more for the pleasure of his company and that of his four-footed companion, Modestine, than for information about that part of France, the Cévennes, through which they travelled. With this book, and his other praises of the 'open road' in prose and verse, Stevenson helped to found the modern cult of the rucksack. There had been others before him, notably the burly Victorian, George Borrow, who wandered through Spain distributing Protestant Bibles to the Catholic peasants (a somewhat dangerous occupation) and tramped resolutely to and fro in *Wild Wales*, before writing a very comprehensive account under that title. After seeing the modern girl in shorts and hobnailed boots swarming up dizzy heights ahead of her boy-friend, it is amusing to read Borrow's account of climbing Snowdon with his daughter. It sounds rather like an attempt on Everest:

The path was now winding and much more steep than it had hitherto been. I was at one time apprehensive that my gentle companion would be obliged to give over the attempt; the gallant girl, however, persevered . . .

Once on the top, Borrow, who greatly prided himself on his knowledge of languages, including Romany and Welsh, and never minded making himself conspicuous, began to recite some verses in the latter language, translating them into appalling English doggerel:

Cold is the snow on Snowdon's brow
It makes the air so chill;
For cold, I trow, there is no snow
Like that of Snowdon's hill.

A hill most chill is Snowdon's hill,
And wintry is his brow;
From Snowdon's hill the breezes chill
Can freeze the very snow.

Such was the harangue which I uttered on the top of Snowdon; to which Henrietta listened with attention; three or four English, who stood

nigh, with grinning scorn, and a Welsh gentleman with considerable interest . . .

Poor Henrietta! She must have found her father a trying companion, but girls in 1862 had to treat parents with respect.

Borrow's account of Llangollen illustrates how descriptive writing has developed since his day. Compare this with Kingdon-Ward or Fleming:

Llangollen is a small town or large village of white houses with slate roofs; it contains about two thousand inhabitants, and is situated principally on the southern side of the Dee. At its western end it has an ancient bridge and a modest unpretending church nearly in its centre. . . . From some of the houses on the southern side there is a noble view—Dinas Bran and its mighty hill forming the principal objects. The view from the northern part of the town, which is indeed little more than a suburb, is not quite so grand, but is nevertheless highly interesting. . . . There are many pleasant villas on both sides of the river, some of which stand a considerable way up the hill.

Now the fact that George Borrow was a most original character, and that great enjoyment can still be found in his books, should not blind us to the feeble quality of that paragraph. The adjectives are colourless. 'Highly interesting', 'pleasant', 'a considerable way' . . . can we picture the scene from such phrases? How are we to imagine the 'ancient bridge'—does it span the river in one or two graceful arches, or does it rest on a whole series, like a Roman aqueduct? Does it spring, like the high railway bridge at Knaresborough, from hill to hill, with the water far beneath, or does it march across, just clearing the surface? And has it those little V-shaped alcoves in the parapet, where foot-passengers can stand aside to avoid being crushed by coaches? Borrow has not even made up his mind whether Llangollen is a small town or a large village, and whether the northern part is a fair half of the place or just a suburb—and incidentally can anything less than a town possess suburbs? The vagueness of his own vision makes his word-picture hazy. It is not that Borrow has never *seen* Llangollen in the literal sense, but that he has never seen it with the exact, observant eye of the writer. Therefore he is incapable of making us see it too.

Set against this, a short passage about another riverside town in Wales, Builth, as described by Robert Gibbings in *Coming Down the Wye*:

The town of Builth is some thirteen miles from Rhayader, and whether you walk the river or drive the road the scenery is some of the loveliest on the Wye. The sleek hills and craggy scarps above Rhayader soon give way to rich wooded slopes where, in early summer, the purple of rhododendrons blazes in the fresh green undergrowth. The river varies infinitely. Here deep calm brown water is edged with shining white gravel. There a rushing stream tumbles over successions of shelving rocks, and then sluices through a narrow gorge. In some places where the river bed is wide there seems scarcely a trickle of water, in others where the bed is narrow there is a torrent. . . .

Builth is a modest town, modest in the sense that it is shy and retiring. Until you are close upon it you do not realize that there is a town there at all, its grey roofs being hidden by surrounding trees. But like many shy and retiring people it has a charm of its own once you are admitted to its intimacies. The streets are narrow and winding, but that is all the better for passing chat. . . .

It was a fair day when I arrived in the town, and I followed the stream of traffic to the fair ground.

'Horse buyers now! Horse buyers, horse buyers! Come on for the ponies now! . . .'

Do you agree that there is a great difference? After reading Borrow's description I feel that I have been glancing into the local guide-book. After Gibbings', I feel that I have walked the thirteen miles along the bank with him, and that I am now in those winding streets, pressing forward to see the ponies. One reason for this, which comes out especially in his first paragraph, is that he possesses the artist's eye—he is an artist, as well as a writer, so his observation is doubly acute. Another reason is that he seems altogether a friendlier, jollier person than Borrow, and comes closer to us. That is the modern fashion. Victorian men-of-letters tended to think more of their dignity. Robert Gibbings has written other 'river books', *Sweet Thames Run Softly* and *Lovely is the Lee*. He writes about the Pacific, too, and those who have not yet tried his travel books may have already enjoyed his adventure-story, *Coconut Island*.

Jan and Cora Gordon, both artists, used to wander through

Europe (and sometimes further), painting, writing books on their adventures, and finally illustrating the books. In *Three Lands on Three Wheels* they travelled by motor-cycle through France, England, and Ireland. Elsewhere they tell of Spain, Albania, and other countries. They even explored the wild country of the film-studios, in *Star-dust in Hollywood*. Another good series (varying in quality as the volumes in a series always do) is the *Silent Traveller* series by Chiang Yee. Here we have the Lake District, the Yorkshire Dales, Oxford, Edinburgh, and other favourite areas described, and painted, by a Chinese visitor. The charm of these books is that of looking at a familiar landscape with completely fresh (in this case Oriental) eyes. Thousands of artists and photographers have shown us Derwentwater, but none of their pictures is at all like Chiang Yee's. Similarly his writing brings freshness, when one has begun to wonder if it were possible to write anything new about the Lakes.

Reading to Find Out

Some of these books contain a good many facts, but in none of them are the facts so important as the author's personality. Often, though, we want information, accurate and full. Then we search the shelves for books of a different type. We may be planning a holiday at home or abroad, we may be studying a country for geography or in order to understand the newspaper more intelligently, and we want facts, not fancies. The book can still be well written, with vigour, clarity, and humour.

It would be pointless to recommend a lot of single titles of this kind, because different readers will naturally want books on different countries. There are several series worth noting. The *Young Traveller* series may fairly be mentioned first, as it is specially written for readers in their 'teens. Each book combines a story with up-to-date, carefully checked information on the particular country concerned. The first ten titles cover the various Dominions, U.S.A., Holland, Switzerland, China, France and Ireland. Another series (*Britain in Pictures*) covers each Dominion, the Colonies, and the British

Isles—stressing the historical side. For Europe there are Sydney A. Clark's little books, *France on Ten Pounds*, *Germany on Ten Pounds*, and so on, still useful for planning holidays though the 'ten pound' limit is sadly out-of-date.

The separate counties of England have been covered by more than one publisher, and it is interesting to compare the *Highways and Byways* series of half a century ago, still the mainstay of many a public library in the Topography Section, with the newer books we may be more tempted to buy for ourselves. It is not merely that the older books are written in a heavier style (which is also sometimes facetious) or that they have niggly little black-and-white sketches instead of beautiful photographs. The real difference is that the focus of interest has changed. The older authors loved to fill pages with anecdotes of Cavaliers, ghosts, and eloping brides. They were less concerned with the unromantic aspects of the past, still less with the ever-changing present. They felt enthusiasm for an old castle or an abbey, but not for a tithe-barn, a Georgian shop-front or an unusual kind of stile. They might listen to an eighty-year-old shepherd telling how life *used* to be on the farms, but they were less interested in the life still going on around them. The modern writer is, at his best, less sentimental, more down to earth, and he expects a similar attitude from his reader. It is no longer enough to maunder on about 'quaint old' buildings and 'beautiful vistas'. The modern reader is credited with an intelligent interest in the elements of architecture, and in the basic facts of climate, geology, and agriculture which make the 'vista' what it is. Some of us are lucky enough to get this explained to us clearly and sensibly at school. If not, there are innumerable books to turn to, from those written specially for young people, like *Houses* by Margaret and Alexander Potter and the various little geological handbooks by I. O. Evans, to those which cater for the whole public. If I were asked to recommend one book alone to be slipped into the rucksack pocket I think I should name *How to Look at Old Buildings* by Edmund Vale. Other people might say a handbook on bird-recognition, wild flowers, or some other aspect

of Nature. Obviously, it depends on your special hobby.

The link between books and living, between reading and action, is particularly marked when we consider this branch of literature. You read a book about a place and you are fired with a desire to go to see it for yourself. Or you plan to go to a place and you try to ensure, by reading a book on it, that you miss nothing of interest, and understand what you see when you get there. We may not be able to go off on Arctic expeditions but we can all walk or cycle within a certain radius of home, and we can all look forward to the not-far-distant date when we can range further afield, using tents or youth hostels, to any part of our home country, and, a year or two later, perhaps beyond. Without studying travel-books we can have no idea of all the possibilities open to us, or of what unexpected places of interest lie almost on our doorsteps. How many Birmingham children, one wonders, have ever cycled over to see the story-book castle of Maxstoke, an island in a broad moat, not ten miles from the roaring traffic of Corporation Street? Yet how many would not feel it was worth the ride after they had seen its photograph in Hugh Braun's book, *The English Castle*?

The publishers of that volume deserve to be named, for the century-old firm of Batsford specializes in beautifully-produced volumes on the countryside, sometimes taking a region, as in H. J. Massingham's *Cotswold Country*, and at other times dealing with a special subject, cottage or cathedral, public school or prehistoric relic, and studying its distribution and variation all over Britain. Thus, Hugh Braun's book deals with castles from the first earth-and-timber forts before the Conquest to the last coastal defences of the Tudors, while the illustrations range from the quaint round Cornish castle of Restormel (superb name!) to the massive square keep which Henry II began to build beside the Tyne in 1171 and which is still called 'Newcastle'. In our last chapter something will be said about design and production of books, and about learning to connect certain publishers' names, just as one does certain authors', with a definite standard of quality, good or bad. Here let it merely

be said that the name of Batsford is a first-class example. The books are distinctive in appearance, with their gay, multi-coloured jacket designs, running from front to back, and, even when they have lost this outer cover, they may still be recognized by their insides. They contain numerous photographic plates, sometimes well over a hundred; sometimes end-papers and a coloured frontispiece as well. Paper, printing and binding are good, as they should be, for the volumes are not cheap; while the illustrations are *always* fine, the text is seldom less than good, and often rises, according to the particular writer, to brilliance. Christopher Hobhouse's *Oxford* is a good sample of this.

9

THE STROLLING PEN

LET US BE perfectly frank at the beginning of this chapter: the very word 'essay' is painful to a large number of boys and girls. It is connected in their minds with desks and classrooms, with sheets of paper mocking in their blank whiteness and with penholders desperately chewed in search of inspiration. 'Write an essay', says the remorseless voice up by the blackboard, 'on "Autumn".' Or perhaps it is 'Punctuality' or 'A Wet Weekend'.

How on earth, it may be asked, can we be expected to enjoy reading other people's essays, when we have found it so boring to write our own? Not every one will say this, of course. There are some in every class who are good at essay-writing and revel in it. But others do not.

There is nothing wrong with these people. Nor is there anything wrong with the Essay as a form of literature. It is merely that it is, of all literary forms, just about the most grown-up, and it should not be rammed down young throats before they are ready for it—any more than vintage wine should be given to those who are only just being allowed their first glass of cider and still, in their hearts, rather prefer lemonade.

At what age can we expect to enjoy reading essays? There is no fixed age, because some people's minds (and hearts) grow much faster than others, and without much reference to the calendar. Your school-report may show that you are three-quarters of an inch taller, five pounds heavier, and three months older than you were at the beginning of the term, but in other ways you may feel *years* older. It may be one of those terms when you have taken great strides forward,

away from your old interests and enthusiasms towards wider horizons.

One such term, I remember, followed my sixteenth birthday. A new English master joined the school, young, humorous, friendly, and—behind all his jokes—inspired with a tremendous love of literature. He was in lodgings near my home, and there, in a little gas-lit parlour crowded with books, I passed from the world of adventure-stories and thrillers into a wider, more varied landscape. Two or three nights a week I went there, borrowing a book or two each time. When he went home for the Christmas holidays, his landlady had orders to let me in and give me free range of the shelves. There was only one rule. I had to record in a notebook each volume I took. An excellent rule . . . it is a pity we do not all keep it—then it would be the same for everybody, and no one would be offended. If there is one person who infuriates me it is the friend who borrows a book, keeps it about three years, and is rather hurt when you notice it on his own shelf and ask for it back. 'Oh, I hadn't forgotten it,' he says in a tone which suggests you are really rather ill-mannered, 'it was quite safe—I had it here all the time.' It never occurs to him that other friends might wish to borrow it, or that you rather like to live with most of your own books around you. Fourteen days is a fair time for reading anything from the public library, and it would be a good thing if (except in special cases) we all made a habit of returning our friends' books within that limit.

What has this grumble got to do with essays? Well, it concerns every kind of book, essays included. But, as the essay is the literary form above all others in which an author is allowed to stray from the point and express his personal views, a chapter *on* essays seems an appropriate place in which to do the same.

But to return to the schoolmaster's sitting-room, with the fog outside, the tobacco-fumes within, and the firelight leaping on cups and saucers and the faded gilt of the book-titles. . . . There, in two short terms, I discovered the novels of Thomas Hardy and John Galsworthy, George Meredith

and Hugh Walpole, the plays of Synge, the poems of Yeats and Alfred Noyes, and—together with much more—the essays of G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. These were the first two authors whose books I borrowed, and when, that Christmas, I began buying adult books for the first time in my life, adding them to my ancient Hentys and Ballantynes and Conan Doyles, they were the first two authors I went for. They were the foundation-stones of my own, private library; and, like all good foundation-stones, they are still in their places.

Belloc I loved because he told of travel, and I was just beginning to take holidays all over England alone—and to dream of the day when I should be allowed to wander further afield. Belloc's *The Path to Rome* is not an essay: it is a kind of travel-book—being written at full length—but its extremely personal style makes it like a big brother to his shorter pieces. It relates how Belloc vowed to walk from a place in France to Rome in as near a geometrically straight line as the Alps make humanly possible. After reading that I bought his essays, *Hills and the Sea*, which give, in a few pages each, vivid pictures of small sailing craft battling in the Channel, or walkers lost in the Pyrenees, or (in quieter mood) the ancient walled city of Carcassonne, the Fens, or the Sussex Downs, as in the essay which starts:

The other day (it was Wednesday, and the air was very pure) I went into the stable upon my way towards the wood, and there I saw my horse Monster, standing by himself, regarding nothingness. And when I had considered what a shame it was to take one's pleasure in a wood and leave one's helpless horse at home, I bridled him and saddled him and took him out, and rode him the way I had meant to go alone. . . .

It was in a companion volume, however, entitled *On Something* (other collections of his essays have been called *On Everything* and *On Nothing*), that I came on the paragraph which seemed to sum up for me what he stood for. Into the mouth of an imaginary character, Peter Wanderwide, he puts these dying words:

'Look you, good people all, in your little passage through the daylight, get to see as many hills and buildings and rivers, fields, books, men, horses, ships and precious stones as you can possibly manage to do. Or else stay in one village and marry in it and die there. For one of these two fates is the best fate for every man. Either to be what I have been, a wanderer with all the bitterness of it, or to stay at home and hear in one's garden the voice of God.'

Chesterton, friend of Belloc, close to him in religious faith and political sympathy, wrote essays very different in both matter and style. In Belloc we have an Oxford man, part-French, his loyalty always divided between the Sussex Downs and the Pyrenees, an intrepid traveller by land and sea: in Chesterton, entirely English, immensely fat, a Fleet Street journalist with his heart anchored to London and the Home Counties, a sort of early-twentieth-century Doctor Johnson but with infinitely more modesty and sense of humour. Whereas Belloc's style is straightforward and clear (as French is), Chesterton delighted in elaborate plays on words, in tricks with familiar phrases and ideas to produce surprises. Thus, in a short story, he once told the tale of a respectable gentleman who attracted great notice by appearing, day after day, wearing a cauliflower on his head. Various theories were advanced to explain this eccentric behaviour. Finally—when the reader is fully mystified—Chesterton produces the true reason. In an argument the gentleman had rashly vowed that, if something was not so, he would 'eat his hat'. Having lost, he resolved as a man of honour to keep his word. Obviously he could not eat an ordinary hat—but what, after all *was* a hat? By dictionary definition it was an outdoor head-covering. Anything worn on the head, therefore, not once but regularly, must surely be a hat? So he wore the vegetable a sufficient number of days to give it status as a hat (and to set the whole neighbourhood talking), and then had it cooked for his dinner, thereby keeping his promise. Chesterton has been called the master of paradox, which is (to quote the dictionary again) a 'seemingly absurd though perhaps really well-founded statement'. Not only his short stories but his essays and poems sparkle with paradox. He is never happier

than when defending what seems to be indefensible—for instance, the English climate:

I suppose that, taking this summer as a whole, people will not call it an appropriate time for praising the English climate. But for my part I will praise the English climate till I die—even if I die of the English climate. There is no weather so good as English weather. Nay, in a real sense there is no weather at all anywhere but in England. In France you have much sun and some rain; in Italy you have hot winds and cold winds; in Scotland and Ireland you have rain, either thick or thin; in America you have hells of heat and cold, and in the Tropics you have sunstrokes varied by thunderbolts. But all these you have on a broad and brutal scale, and you settle down into contentment or despair. Only in our own romantic country do you have the strictly romantic thing called Weather; beautiful and changing as a woman.

And who but Chesterton could wax eloquent in praise of marshes—not one particular marsh with noble associations, like Alfred's Athelney, but marshes in general?

In books as a whole marshes are described as desolate and colourless, great fields of clay or sedge, vast horizons of drab or grey. But this, like many other literary associations, is a piece of poetical injustice. Monotony has nothing to do with a place; monotony, either in its sensation or its infliction, is simply the quality of a person. There are no dreary sights; there are only dreary sightseers. It is a matter of taste, that is of personality, whether marshes are monotonous; but it is a matter of fact and science that they are not monochrome. The tops of high mountains (I am told) are all white; the depths of primeval caverns (I am also told) are all dark. The sea will be grey or blue for weeks together; and the desert, I have been led to believe, is the colour of sand. The North Pole (if we found it) would be white with cracks of blue; and Endless Space (if we went there) would, I suppose, be black with white spots. If any of these were counted of a monotonous colour I could well understand it; but on the contrary, they are always spoken of as if they had the gorgeous and chaotic colours of a cosmic kaleidoscope. Now exactly where you can find colours like those of a tulip garden or a stained-glass window, is in those sunken and sodden lands which are always called dreary. Of course the great tulip gardens did arise in Holland; which is simply one immense marsh.

This trick of paradox, like all tricks, can be overdone. Chesterton sometimes overdid it until it became wearisome. He was particularly open to Tolstoy's criticism: 'I try to say

precisely what I mean, but Englishmen have in their blood a desire to say things neatly rather than exactly . . . to subordinate the sense to the sound.' For that reason many readers enjoy Chesterton's style more over a short distance, as in an essay, than in a full-length book.

The Lighter Touch

The other well-known essayists of this century always seem to me rather lightweight compared with these two. It is not that they care any the less about the serious things of life—Robert Lynd, for example, shared the same politics as Belloc and Chesterton, and A. A. Milne (though we may connect his name with Christopher Robin and *Toad of Toad Hall*) has written eloquently against war. But Lynd and Milne, E. V. Knox and E. V. Lucas, and A. G. Gardiner (who wrote under the pen-name, Alpha of the Plough), preferred on the whole to deal wittily and charmingly with trivialities. Most of them wrote a good deal for *Punch*—and that great magazine is apt to impress its regular contributors with a common stamp. They must be prepared to smile at most things and to keep off subjects close to their hearts, a requirement which neither Chesterton nor Belloc could ever have fulfilled. Above all, they must be able to laugh at themselves—which Chesterton could do uproariously, and Belloc to a lesser extent, but both of them in quite a different, un-Punchlike way.

Here is a fair sample of Robert Lynd's manner, from his collection, *The Peal of Bells*. One afternoon, he tells us, he visited two ladies and was welcomed with great relief. Their washerwoman had sought refuge in the kitchen from her drunken navy husband—from whom a visit was expected at any moment. The ladies were sure that the essayist, if *he* opened the door, would easily be able to deal with the bully and teach him a lesson. The essayist was not so confident, but he 'sat down feeling very pessimistic, and at intervals murmured the Lord's Prayer' to himself, while his ears strained for the bang of the front gate which would herald the brawny Mr. Smith.

. . . I was wondering whether any of the weapons that I saw on the wall and on the mantelpiece would be of any use to me. There was the great black club of a Congo chief . . . I might hit Smith a bump on the head with that. . . . But suppose Smith disarmed me before I could hit him, and brought the club down on my head with the full force of a navvy hammering a pile into the ground. In that case I should probably be killed. My thoughts turned in preference to an old naval sword that was hanging on the wall. But how the dickens does one use a sword? It is all very well to say 'Cut off his head with it' or 'Stick him in the stomach with it', but I have a notion that all this needs practice. The sword attracted me, however, for, if I knew how to use it, I could kill Smith; and I wanted to kill Smith. At least, I longed for Smith to be dead. God help me! is that the front gate opening? It is. . . .

Here is that commonest of everyday situations—when you ask the way, and get such a flow of instructions you wish that you hadn't—handled by E. V. Lucas in *A Fronded Isle*:

. . . 'Yes,' he says, detaining you, 'you don't go down by The Golfers' Arms, but wait till you come to The Footballers' Legs. You can't go wrong. There's a sign-post. And then keep on for about a mile. Don't turn to the left there, but to the right.'

'Thank you, thank you,' you say.

'Don't forget to pass The Golfers' Arms,' he reminds you. 'There's a turning there, but don't take it.'

'You can't go wrong,' he calls out. 'Turn down opposite The Footballers' Legs, not the Golfers' Arms.'

'Right!' you shout back; 'right. Thank you very much.'

'You're welcome,' he bellows in reply. 'You can't go wrong.'

E. V. Lucas, incidentally, was a great cricket enthusiast, and his writings on this subject are collected in a volume entitled *Cricket All His Life*.

And here is A. A. Milne in *It's Too Late Now*, giving an account of his first efforts at rock-climbing which is so funny that it qualified handsomely for inclusion in *The Phoenix Book of Wit and Humour*. The essayist and his brother set out for Napes Needle, in Cumberland, armed with a climber's rope. It has been agreed that the writer shall lead.

Not only had I won the Gymnastics Competition Under 14 in 1892, but compared with Ken's my life was now of no value. Ken had just got

engaged to be married. If I led, we might both be killed (as seemed likely with this rope) or I might be killed alone, but it was impossible that I should ever be breaking the news to his lady of an accident which I had callously survived. I was glad of this, of course; but I should have liked it better if it had been I who was engaged and Ken who was being glad.

How would *you* feel if told to write six pages on 'Catching the Train'? In *Pebbles on the Shore* Alpha of the Plough showed how an essayist could play with the smallest idea:

There are some people who make nothing of catching trains. They can catch trains with as miraculous an ease as Cinquevalli catches half a dozen billiard-balls. I believe they could catch trains in their sleep. They are never too early and never too late. They leave home or office with a quiet certainty of doing the thing that is simply stupefying. Whether they walk, or take a bus, or call a taxi, it is the same: they do not hurry, they do not worry, and when they find they are in time and that there is plenty of room they manifest no surprise. . . . Now I am different. I have been catching trains all my life, and all my life I have been afraid I shouldn't catch them. Familiarity with the habits of trains cannot get rid of a secret conviction that their aim is to give me the slip if it can be done. No faith in my own watch can affect my doubts as to the reliability of the watch of the guard or the station clock or whatever deceitful signal the engine-driver obeys.

Writers on Nature

The golden age for essayists was at the beginning of the century, when there were many more newspapers and small magazines, and much more scope for the journalist who was also a literary craftsman. To-day the light essay still holds up its head in a few papers of quality, but few collections come out in book-form. Notable among these few, however, is *Small Calendars* by J. H. B. Peel, one of our younger essayists who is also a poet. He lives in the Chilterns, and this book takes us through the country year, with a shrewd observation of local characters and of Nature in every mood. Look at the colours in this description of a spring morning:

White comes from the cherry blossom fading in the distance to silver-grey, very handsome and sedate. Blackthorn as it catches the sunlight appears rather creamy than white, and the boughs of cherry not yet in blossom wear a mottled, salmon sheen. The tiles of the valley farm make

a warm crest of red. . . . Where the young wheat grows sparsely, and the chalk shows through, bright sunlight falls on a sort of fawn-coloured, heather aspect. . . . The bark of trees seen against the sun is black, pure ebony, and the dandelions wear the look of molten brass . . . through a gap in the hedge there is a land-bound rainbow where strawberry roan and one chestnut hunter browse placidly among Jerseys. . . . Last (and, beyond all question, to me the most dear) is the black ruff of my dog Bill as he basks benignly in the valley he knows so well. I can see also the brindle of his hindquarters, and the silver of his quietly-ageing mouth.

This observation of Nature and country life runs through much of our English literature—it is part of our tradition. It is not confined, of course, to our essayists. Our poetry is rich in it: how rich, we may only realize when we pick up a specially selected anthology like Viola Meynell's *Anthology of Nature Poetry*. It comes into our fiction, notably into such novels as Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* and *The Pathway*, and into children's stories ranging from the classic *Bevis* by Richard Jefferies to recent works like Malcolm Saville's *Jane's Country Year*. That semi-fictional autobiography already mentioned, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, is full of it. So are many books which might be catalogued under the heading of Travel, such accounts of walking tours in Britain as *Afoot in England* by W. H. Hudson. Letters and diaries, too . . . Gilbert White, the eighteenth-century parson who wrote *The Natural History of Selborne*, has been imitated by many later writers, if not surpassed. And in what shelf shall we put *The Compleat Angler*, that remarkable book by a remarkable man? Izaak Walton was a retired Fleet Street ironmonger, with little education but a personality which endeared him to famous poets such as Ben Jonson, Michael Drayton, and John Donne, to wits and churchmen and at least one ambassador. *The Compleat Angler*, written in his old age just after the Civil War, is a blend of philosophy and practical hints, dialogue and scraps of song, which defies classification. Only one thing is certain: it is a classic of the English countryside.

The great Nature essayist was Richard Jefferies, a Wiltshire farmer's son of the mid-Victorian period. His style is sometimes far from perfect, but his merits outweigh his

faults; more than one selection of his work has been published, so it is easy to find the best without having to read the whole. No essayist better conveys the inspiration which comes from the open fields. As he wrote in *Hills and the Vale*:

From the blue hill lines, from the dark copses on the ridges, the shadows in the coombes, from the apple-sweet wind and rising grasses, from the leaf issuing out of the bud to question the sun—there comes from all of these an influence which forces the heart to lift itself in earnest and purest desire. The soul knows itself, and would live its own life.

The First English Essayist

Nothing has been said yet, deliberately, about Lamb, Hazlitt, Macaulay, Addison, Steele, and the other great names which make up the three-and-a-half centuries of essay-writing in England. It may well be that they have to be studied at school, and some boys and girls—especially if they are lucky in their English teacher—may develop a taste for them early. But to many of us, while we are young, they make little appeal, and we are far more likely to enjoy them a few years later if we begin with the moderns, who write about the world we know.

In strict honesty I should add that there is one great essayist whose works were thrust at me in school—and which I genuinely liked from the start. If they had not been in the English syllabus, I might never have met them at all. So there is something to be said in favour of compulsory classics! Whether any one else will share my liking for Francis Bacon I cannot guess, but as he was the first Englishman to write essays, borrowing the idea from the Frenchman Montaigne, it seems only fair to mention him.

Bacon published his first little book in 1597, when Shakespeare, three years younger, was just coming to the fore as a poet and playwright; the last essay was written in 1625, the year Charles I became king. Whether or not, as some ingenious people persuade themselves, Bacon really wrote the plays which pass as Shakespeare's, he was a brilliant and versatile man—deeply learned, full of scientific curiosity, a philosopher, diplomat, lawyer, politician, and altogether a

leading figure in the England of James I. His essays are all brief and packed with thought, hardly a word being wasted. They are like diamonds—the first rough idea has been cut and polished till it glitters small and perfect but (like a diamond) sharp and hard. He writes with worldly wisdom on subjects like Revenge and Ambition, and with more charm on those near to his heart, such as Gardens. Here, in the practical tone of one advising on amateur dramatics, he deals with the production of court-masques:

It is true, the alterations of scenes, so it be quietly and without noise, are things of great beauty and pleasure; for they feed and relieve the eye before it be full of the same object. Let the scenes abound with light, especially coloured and varied; and let the masquers, or any other that are to come down from the scene, have some motions upon the scene itself before their coming down; for it draws the eye strangely, and makes it with great pleasure to desire to see that it cannot perfectly discern. Let the songs be loud and cheerful, and not chirpings or pulings; let the music likewise be sharp and loud, and well placed. The colours that show best by candlelight are white, carnation, and a kind of sea-water green. . . . As for rich embroidery, it is lost and not discerned.

Bacon's Jacobean English is sometimes a slight handicap to the beginner—we have to stop and work out what he means. I remember we had a caretaker at school with whom we kept up a feud. He, very naturally, liked to get the building clear as soon as possible after the last lesson, and was sworn enemy to play-rehearsals, literary societies, and such-like activities. How gleefully, therefore, the form pounced on one line of Bacon's, wilfully misunderstanding its sense! 'A man cannot by care taking add a cubit to his stature.'

Scarcely any English prose work has been more quoted than this little book. 'Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man. . . . Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. . . . Men fear death as children fear to go into the dark. . . . Suspicions amongst thoughts are like bats among birds—they ever fly by twilight. . . . God Almighty first planted a garden, and, indeed, it is the purest

of human pleasures. . . .’ Many of his sayings crop up as frequently as quotations from *Hamlet* or the Bible.

To enjoy these essays we have not merely to adjust ourselves to his Jacobean use of words, we have got to put ourselves inside his Jacobean mind, summoning up whatever historical knowledge we possess to fill in the background. We must try, for the time being, to *be* Bacon, to exist inside his rich padded clothes and elaborate ruff, to project ourselves into the hard head under that chimney-pot hat. We are the King’s Attorney-General, we hope some day to be Lord Chancellor and a viscount. We have known Walter Raleigh and all the leading persons of the age. We live in a world of plots and intrigues, ambition and tragedy—and we are very much part of it. But sometimes, for an hour, we step back and look at it all in perspective, and here in the *Essays* is what we think about it. Or rather as much of our thought as we think prudent to tell.

That is the historical side of Bacon. But he would not have worn so well merely as a revelation of life and thought in Jacobean times. He lives also because, like Pepys, he says so much to people of later generations.

Houses are built to live in, and not to look on; therefore, let use be preferred before uniformity, except where both may be had. Leave the goodly fabrics of houses, for beauty, only to the enchanted palaces of the poets, who build them with small cost.

There speaks the Jacobean gentleman surveying with critical eye some of the flamboyant, unpractical mansions which the new ruling families of England were building at the time. But those words, ‘Houses are built to live in, and not to look on’, though only half the truth, are a shrewd reminder to some over-enthusiastic planners to-day.

10

FROM AUTHOR TO BOOKSHELF

How WOULD YOU like a book thirty feet long? It is the only kind you would have been able to get in the early days of European literature, even if you had been Alexander the Great himself. His favourite book was the *Iliad*. It took up a dozen thirty-foot rolls of papyrus, each ruled into one hundred and twenty narrow 'pages' with margins at top, bottom and sides. Each end of the roll was attached to a stick. Alexander took the first stick in his left hand and began to unroll the first few inches with his right hand, until the first 'page' was uncovered. Then, as he read on from left to right, he had to roll up the part he had read, with his left hand. If he got very excited by the story, or was merely skimming through to find some particular line, he might forget to roll up the book as he went along, and it would fall across his knees and curl round his ankles like a snake.

To-day, the whole of the *Iliad* in one of its English translations can be printed in a single 'Penguin'.

Again, if we could have looked over Alexander's shoulder, we should have seen that each line of the poem was written in an unbroken series of letters, with no space between the words. Reading a book, obviously, was a much more difficult process twenty-three centuries ago.

This is a reminder that a book is something more than the words of an author. Of course, those words—except in picture books—must always be the most important thing, and we have been quite right, so far, to concentrate on the literary qualities. But the fullest possible enjoyment of books can come only if we learn to appreciate them as pleasures to the eye and hand, examples of craftsmanship which all kinds of highly-

skilled people have combined to make. In this last chapter, therefore, let us see what happens to a book when the writer's part is done.

His manuscript (strictly speaking it is now usually a typescript) goes to the publishers. They, if they like the book, will undertake the whole expense and responsibility of transforming his manuscript into thousands of printed volumes and marketing them. Some publishers have their own printing works and binderies, some pay other firms to do this work for them. In either case it is usually carried out elsewhere, often in small country towns where rent and other costs are low, whereas the editorial work is done at the head office, nearly always in London. Most publishers are to be found in three districts, either round St. Paul's, or near Covent Garden, or in Bloomsbury near the British Museum. Some firms are very old, dating from the eighteenth or very early nineteenth century—the Oxford University Press was founded in 1468—and they are extremely proud of their traditions. Some occupy beautiful Georgian and even earlier houses, with oak paneling and graceful staircases, and some are like little museums, so full are they of portraits, signed photographs, and other relics of famous writers whose works they have published. Not all enjoy such surroundings, though, and it is only fair to remember the fine books which have been designed by people with very little capital, sitting elbow to elbow in a few cheap top rooms of a shabby building in a back-street.

The publishers pass the manuscript to one or more 'readers' for examination. These may be on the staff, or may be outside persons. Naturally, a specialized book on, say, Indian art must be judged by an expert on that subject, whereas a novel can be judged by a general reader. Each reader reports on the manuscript, advising for or against its acceptance. With these reports before them, the directors decide whether to take it or not. Some, or all, may have read it themselves, but this depends on how big the firm's output is. Some firms publish over two hundred different books annually.

How do they decide which to accept? As we have seen in earlier chapters, it is not always easy to decide why one book

seems better than another. No book is perfect, so it is usually a question of balancing its good qualities against its bad. Even if the publishers agree that it is a good book from the literary point of view, they have two further questions to answer. (1) Will it sell? (2) Is it the sort of book for *our* firm to publish—is it in line with our policy, and will it harm or enhance our reputation?

The first question has to be considered in relation to the cost of production, the price the public will pay for such a book, and roughly how many copies will be bought—and these are awkward calculations, because each figure depends on the others. Cost of production per copy will be much less if twenty thousand copies are printed instead of two thousand, but it is no use printing that number if the public will not buy them. Whereas, with children's books, one which is a shilling cheaper may sell many more than its rival, a scientific textbook which certain students and libraries simply *must* have will sell almost as many copies at thirty shillings as if it cost a guinea. Somehow the publishers must try to make sense of all these shifting and doubtful figures, and make a reasonable forecast whether they are likely to make or lose money on the book.

Even then, strange as it sounds, there are firms which will accept a book they expect to lose on, and reject another which promises a comfortable profit. Why?

They will publish a 'loser', sometimes, because it reveals original talent in the author, and they believe that in time that talent will be appreciated by the public. Then, they will not only get their money back, by publishing the author's later and more successful books, but they will have added to their reputation for discovering good work. Similarly they may reject a certain 'winner' because, though they know it will please the uncritical public, it is a bad book, and they would be ashamed to let their name—their 'imprint' as it is called—appear upon it. A few firms have definite policies of their own, and will publish nothing, however well written, which is against their own political or religious views. Most publishers however are not definitely 'pro' or 'anti' anything. If a book

is sincere and well written, they will gladly publish it however much they disagree with its arguments, whereas they would be ashamed to handle one which was inaccurate in fact or shoddy in style. Some firms, again, will publish anything whatever if it will show a profit: hence most of the trash.

One learns, in time, which publishers can be relied upon. Often in a library, not knowing an author's name, I have chosen or discarded a novel as soon as I saw the publisher's name. Sometimes he prints a little sign, or colophon, on every book he issues, and one learns to look for this. The colophon of *this* book's publisher is, appropriately, a phoenix and will be found on the title-page. Sometimes a colophon is also placed on the spine, or back, of the book and on the dust-jacket. Book-lovers could have quite a competition, collecting and identifying colophons, and asking each other what publishers were represented by an Antarctic bird, a windmill, an urn of flowers, a fountain, a sea-bird, and an open book bearing a Latin phrase. This kind of trade-mark is almost as old as printing itself. Aldus Manutius of Venice used a dolphin entwined with an anchor. It was he who first produced books in a handy modern size, writing in 1501: 'We have printed, and we are now publishing, the satires of Juvenal and Persius in a very small format, so that they may conveniently be held in the hand.'

What Shall It Look Like?

Format is the next thing the publisher must consider, once he has signed an agreement with the author. And format is another test by which the experienced person can often guess the publisher before seeing his name or colophon. There is no space here to go into all the technical problems of book design. We can only list some of the points the publisher must decide. How big shall the page be? What kind of paper shall be used? How will it take the ink—and the sort of illustrations which are to be used? Paper varies from the fine thin crackly India paper to the wretched thick stuff on which some firms used to print their children's books, to 'bulk' them and make the story look longer than it was. Sometimes different paper

will be needed for those pages on which the illustrations are to come. It all depends—and so will the cost of the book—on whether there are to be simple black-and-white illustrations, photographs, or (most costly of all) colour.

Then there is the type. Those of us who have not mastered the principles of 'typography' are apt to say that a book is printed in large or small type. We can usually identify 'italic' as the sloping letters, and guess that 'roman' is the upright variety, but terms like Baskerville and Bembo remain a mystery to us, and must (so far as this chapter is concerned) continue so. But there is no reason why we should not look at our books more critically and judge them by the standards of William Morris, who founded his own press in 1891 'to produce books which it would be a pleasure to look upon as pieces of printing and arrangement of types', adding that 'they should be easy to read and should not dazzle the eye or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form in the letters'. Various types possess this essential clarity, some more suitable for one purpose than for another. Each 'type family' is obtainable in a range of sizes. Publishers have their preferences and try, by choice of type, size of margin, use or absence of page headings, and in other ways, to give their books what they call a 'house style', so that a trained observer, suddenly shown an open book, can make a shrewd guess at the publisher without turning to the cover. If you study the publishers' advertisements in any paper like the *Observer* or *Sunday Times*, in which a large number can be seen on one page, you will quickly realize how much of this 'house style' shows in the typography and lay-out of the various announcements. Certain firms can be 'spotted' almost from the far side of the room.

On illustrations we all have our opinions. Booksellers vow they cannot sell juvenile books without pictures, but many older boys and girls seem to prefer them so. 'Pictures spoil my own ideas of the characters,' I have heard them complain. 'I often cover them with my hand.' It would be a good thing if a vote could be taken on this question, because pictures add a lot to the cost of production, and therefore to the price. On

the other hand, really fine illustrations add so much to the value that they are well worth the expense. Nowadays artists are more and more talking of 'decorating' rather than 'illustrating' a book, and this may be more satisfactory. Instead of slavishly representing a scene which the author has already skilfully described in words, they draw something which adds or emphasizes. Robert Gibbings' engravings for his own *Coming Down the Wye* and his woodcuts for Eleanor Doorly's scientific biographies are good examples of this.

Except for picture-books, where the illustrations may be the more important part, the publisher normally engages the artist and pays him a lump sum. Often, though, he consults the author first, and they agree on the man they want and then on the rough sketches he submits for approval. Sometimes author and artist work in close touch, sometimes they never meet. The best results are not always reached by the former method.

Meanwhile the book itself may have been set up in type and the printer may have run off the long 'galley proofs'—long strips of paper, each carrying what will eventually become two or three pages of the book. These galleys are carefully corrected by the author and others. Printing errors are marked, and the author may still, within reason, make small alterations to his book.

Woe betide him if he does this to the second batch, the 'page proofs', when they arrive! The long columns of type have now been divided up into pages as they will finally appear, and the pictures (printed from 'blocks') have been fitted into place. Naturally, any printing errors which previously escaped notice *must* be corrected—this is the last chance—but if the author wants to alter a phrase he must replace it with one of the same length, otherwise there will be a gap or it won't go into the space available and perhaps several pages will have to be reset to cover it.

The binding of the book is a highly-skilled job and represents a big fraction of the cost. It is one of the reasons—but only one—why a well-produced junior novel will cost anything from six shillings to eight-and-sixpence, whereas the

little stationer's shop round the corner has plenty at prices like four-and-sixpence. If we examine these cheaper books we usually find that the covers are of poor material and unlikely to stand up to vigorous handling: that is why, apart from their poor literary quality, we shall find none of these books in the public library. Librarians think a great deal about bindings, because they want their books to survive years of borrowing. To rebind an old book is sometimes almost as expensive as buying a new copy, so they put off the evil day as long as they can, and do not grumble too much at paying a higher price for a well-bound volume. If we examine the cheap book further (we are not talking about classics or modern best-sellers, naturally—their cheapness is due to other causes), we may notice that the paper is coarse in texture and greyish in colour; it may have taken the ink smudgily, and the pictures show through from the other side. These shoddy volumes are seldom well written, being mostly by third-rate 'hacks' who cannot get their stories taken by a good publisher. As they have to work very fast to make a living on the poor terms offered, their stories are less likely to contain either original ideas or careful writing.

Our imaginary book is now printed and, let us hope, securely bound in good cloth with clear, elegant lettering on the spine, which will not fade too much or tarnish with the years. All it needs now is a paper jacket, designed to attract attention as it stands among its rivals on the counter. Inside this jacket, on the front flap, is the 'blurb' describing the contents, sometimes practically telling you the story (which is a pity), and nearly always strongly suggesting that you would be wise to buy the book. Though a blurb can be helpful not many of us are so innocent as to choose our books by the blurb alone.

Buying and Borrowing

If we are lucky enough to live near a good bookshop, we may get a lot of help there. A true bookseller has a genuine love for the goods he sells, and an uncanny knowledge of what lies tucked away in the remotest corners. Also, through his trade-papers and his contacts with publishers' travellers, he knows

what we cannot know—the books which are coming out next month or even next season. A good bookshop differs from most other shops in this, that the customer is not expected to buy every time he comes in. In many bookshops, indeed, the staff work on the old rule, ‘speak when you’re spoken to’, and never approach the browsing customer unless he has a question to ask or is holding out his money to pay. Never be afraid of going into such a place. Provided your hands are clean (remove gloves, if any) and your behaviour good, no bookseller worth his salt will mind your looking round. He knows that if you buy nothing to-day, you may buy something next week, or next Christmas.

Whether or not we have a friendly bookseller to advise us, we can all get help from the reviewers. Advance copies of the book are sent, weeks before publication, to newspapers, magazines, and the B.B.C. Not all their criticism is sound. Some reviewers merely air their own opinions; others crib the plot from the blurb and add a few meaningless compliments without reading the book at all; others again are both wise and conscientious, and their recommendations are valuable. The best adult reviewing is found in such weeklies as *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Time and Tide*, and *The New Statesman*, the *Sunday Observer* and *Sunday Times*, and—best of all perhaps for those just starting to explore the world of adult literature—the rather more popular *John o’ London’s*. Among the most important provincial dailies is *The Manchester Guardian*.

Juvenile books are reviewed in these and many other papers but on the whole rather skimpily. There is too little good reviewing of such books, partly because they nearly all come out in a rush before Christmas (when there is no space to deal with them fully) and partly because grown-up reviewers hesitate to judge them. Boy and girl reviewers, on the other hand, seldom have the skill and experience to explain why a book is good or bad, and can only say that it is. Since tastes vary, that does not help the rest of us. However, if we watch the reviews in one or two good papers, and the publishers’ advertisements (which naturally quote all the warmest opinions), we are not likely to miss hearing about

any *new* book of outstanding merit. What, though, about the old ones?

The first thing that all boys and girls in Britain should get firmly into their heads is that practically any book they wish to read is, with a little effort, within their reach. This sounds a bold promise: let us examine it. Almost every school has a library of some sort. It may be small, but there is usually a grant to be spent each year on new books. If the pupils are keen enough, they can often raise extra funds. One school collected empty jam jars and bought books with the proceeds. In choosing new books, the librarian is generally only too glad to receive suggestions, if they are made sensibly and politely, giving full details of the book and a reason why it is worth buying.

Then there is the public library, with junior and adult departments. Even remote villages are now served by the County Library vans. Even if your local public library is only two boxes of books, kept at the village school, opened once a week, and changed every few months, you can get what you want *if you ask for it*. In this case the librarian may not be an expert—he or she is usually just a good-natured and public-spirited person doing the job for nothing—and you must not expect him to be a human catalogue. But again, if your request is sensible and properly put, it will be attended to. If not, write to the County Librarian at your county town; no fuller address is needed. If you live in a town, or go to school in one, you can put your requests direct to the trained professionals behind the library counter. They are there to help you. But they will prove more friendly if you tackle them in their slack times, not when a long queue is collecting behind you.

Not only will they help you to find what you want among their stock, they will welcome suggestions for new books to add. And—this is a wonderful service which far too few grown-ups know about—if a book is wanted just by one borrower, and is either so specialized that it is not worth buying (since nobody else might read it for years) or out-of-print and therefore unobtainable in the shops, then a message

will be sent out over the network linking all the public libraries in Britain, and that volume will be lent by any town which happens to possess it. Note that this service does not apply to fiction, or to non-fiction books below a certain price, which (if you really want them so specially) you can reasonably be expected to save up for and buy. How far it is available to boys and girls will depend on their particular librarian, and how they tackle him with their request. My own impression is that, if you are already known as a regular borrower and a genuine book-lover, and can explain that you really want this particular book for serious reading, he will not refuse you simply because you are not yet old enough to pay rates.

To get the fullest use out of your library you should read three little books, *How to Use Books* and *How to Find Out*, both by Lionel McColvin, and *Four to Fourteen*, compiled by Kathleen Lines. The first two will help you to get the hang of directories, Year Books, and all the other fearsome volumes in the reference library; to use an index and a library catalogue; and, in short, to find that the library is really a storehouse of pleasure and knowledge, with all kinds of unexpected services at your disposal, and not a grim public building where you hardly dare to breathe. Kathleen Lines's book is different. It classifies about twelve hundred books, fiction and non-fiction, for readers between four and fourteen years. Whether you are looking for a good historical novel or a manual on boxing, you will find it easily in these pages, together with publisher, price, and a few words of description. Every good school library and junior public library should have this book for you to consult when you ask for it. It will put you on the track of many fine books which have been out for years and which otherwise you might never have heard of. All these three guides are published by the Cambridge University Press for the National Book League.

And what is the National Book League? It is a huge society of book-lovers, to which any one can belong, there being a specially low subscription for young people. It has its headquarters in a beautiful and historic house at 7, Albemarle Street, off Piccadilly. Here it holds meetings and

exhibitions, which sometimes include Children's Book Fairs and talks by popular children's authors. Members use the place as a club when they are in London. There is a restaurant, lounges where you can talk, an information bureau (for literary queries), and a special kind of library. There are N.B.L. branches in many towns, meeting for talks and discussions, and it helps to organize Children's Book Weeks, when the schools are taken to the public library to see displays and hear talks by writers and artists.

Almost every town in Britain has its literary societies. Many of them are glad to welcome new members still at school, so there is no need to be shy. Librarians can usually tell you when and where they meet, and the address of the honorary secretary—that is just another of the thousand things the librarian has to know—and subscriptions are seldom high. To the real book-lover one of the pleasantest things in life is to share his enthusiasm with like-minded people, and a literary society is the obvious place to meet them. If, though, you are much happier with people of your own age, consider how lively you can make such a society in your own school. Some junior libraries, too, are starting these activities, in which case you can meet people from other schools.

But, when everything has been said about libraries and literary societies, our chief enjoyment from books will always come from those carefully-chosen, treasured volumes which are wholly our own, be they a mere row of half a dozen cheap editions kept in a room shared with other members of the family, or the myriad ranks in that book-walled study we dream of possessing some day. We cannot begin collecting too soon. Now, if we have not already started, is the time. Some of the books we gather round us in our schooldays will be giving us pleasure fifty years hence and more, when they have wandered with us through half a dozen hostels and lodgings and homes of our own. But if they are really to do that, and not to be thrown away as we grow up, they must be chosen carefully indeed—chosen for subject and style, and as articles of beauty in themselves, as worthy of their place in the room as any ornament or piece of furniture.

SOME BOOKS YOU MAY ENJOY

These suggestions do not include every title already mentioned in this volume, because mentioning a book (to illustrate a point) is not always the same as recommending it, and also because there are so many good books which there was no space to name there, let alone quote. This list gives a chance to include a few more. The starred titles are books written specially for young readers.

FICTION

Jane Austen:	<i>Northanger Abbey</i>
Rumer Godden:	<i>A Candle for St. Jude</i>
Thomas Hardy:	<i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i>
Rosamond Lehmann:	<i>Invitation to the Waltz</i>
Richard Llewellyn:	<i>How Green Was My Valley</i>
J. B. Priestley:	<i>The Good Companions</i>
Hugh Walpole:	<i>Fortitude</i>
H. G. Wells:	<i>Ann Veronica</i>
Francis Brett Young:	<i>The House Under the Water</i>

Adventure

* David Craigie:	<i>The Voyage of the Luna I</i>
A. Conan Doyle:	<i>The Lost World</i>
Rider Haggard:	<i>King Solomon's Mines</i>
James Hilton:	<i>Lost Horizon</i>
* John Masefield:	<i>The Bird of Dawning</i>
Jules Verne:	<i>Round the World in Eighty Days</i>
H. G. Wells:	<i>The War of the Worlds</i>

Mystery

John Buchan:	<i>Greenmantle</i>
G. K. Chesterton:	<i>The Father Brown Stories</i>
A. Conan Doyle:	<i>The Complete Sherlock Holmes Short Stories</i>
M. R. James:	<i>Ghost Stories of An Antiquary</i>
* C. Day Lewis:	<i>The Otterbury Incident</i>
* P. H. Newby:	<i>The Loot Runners</i>
* L. A. G. Strong:	<i>Odd Man In</i>

School

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| * Rudyard Kipling: | <i>Stalky and Co.</i> |
| * A. Stephen Tring: | <i>The Old Gang</i> |
| * Elfrida Vipont: | <i>The Lark in the Morn</i> |
| Hugh Walpole: | <i>Jeremy at Crale</i> |
| Alec Waugh: | <i>The Loom of Youth</i> |

Historical

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| Leslie Barringer: | <i>Joris of the Rock</i> |
| * Moyra Charlton: | <i>Pendellion</i> |
| Naomi Mitchison: | <i>The Conquered</i> |
| * Carola Oman: | <i>Baltic Spy</i> |
| Rafael Sabatini: | <i>Bardelys the Magnificent</i> |
| * Alison Uttley: | <i>The Traveller in Time</i> |

Humour & Fantasy

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| Michael Barsley (ed.): | <i>The Phoenix Book of Wit and Humour</i> |
| W. W. Jacobs: | <i>Many Cargoes</i> |
| Jerome K. Jerome: | <i>Three Men In A Boat</i> |
| Stephen Leacock: | <i>Literary Lapses</i> |
| * Mary Norton: | <i>The Magic Bed-Knob</i> |
| 'Saki' (H. H. Munro): | <i>Collected Short Stories</i> |
| James Stephens: | <i>The Crock of Gold</i> |
| * J. R. R. Tolkien: | <i>The Hobbit</i> |
| * Mark Twain: | <i>Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i> |
| P. G. Wodehouse: | <i>My Man Jeeves</i> |

PLAYS

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| J. M. Barrie: | <i>Quality Street</i> |
| J. W. Marriott (ed.): | <i>Great Modern British Plays</i> |
| Bernard Shaw: | <i>St. Joan</i> |
| Oscar Wilde: | <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> |

POETRY

- | | |
|--|--|
| Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (ed.): | <i>The Oxford Book of English Verse</i> |
| T. F. Higham and C. M. Bowra (ed.): | <i>The Oxford Book of Greek Verse in English Translation</i> |
| Richard Church and M. M. Bozman (ed.): | <i>Poems of Our Time, 1900-1942</i> |
| Viola Meynell (ed.): | <i>An Anthology of Nature Poetry</i> |
| * T. W. Sussams (ed.): | <i>A Book of Town Verse</i> |

BIOGRAPHY

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| * C. H. Abrahall: | <i>Prelude</i> (Eileen Joyce) |
| * Eleanor Doorly: | <i>Ragamuffin King</i> (Henry of Navarre) |
| Laura Knight: | <i>Oil Paint and Greasepaint</i> |
| * Patricia Lynch: | <i>A Storyteller's Childhood</i> |
| Ella K. Maillart: | <i>Cruises and Caravans</i> |
| André Maurois: | <i>Ariel</i> (Shelley) |
| * Edward Robinson: | <i>Lawrence, The Story of His Life</i> |
| Siegfried Sassoon: | <i>Memoirs of A Foxhunting Man</i> |
| J. M. Scott: | <i>Gino Watkins</i> |

DIARIES AND LETTERS

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| F. W. Tickner(ed.): | <i>A Shorter Pepys</i> |
| T. E. Mason (ed.): | <i>A Book of British Letters</i> |

TRAVEL

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Hilaire Belloc: | <i>The Path to Rome</i> |
| Peter Fleming: | <i>News from Tartary</i> |
| Robert Gibbings: | <i>Coming Down the Wye</i> |
| * C. Walter Hodges: | <i>Columbus Sails</i> |

NATURE

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| S. J. Looker (ed.): | <i>The Jefferies Companion</i> |
| * Malcolm Saville: | <i>Jane's Country Year</i> |
| Izaak Walton: | <i>The Compleat Angler</i> |
| Gilbert White: | <i>The Natural History of Selborne</i> |
| Henry Williamson: | <i>Tarka the Otter</i> |

ESSAYS

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| Hilaire Belloc: | <i>Hills and the Sea</i> |
| G. K. Chesterton: | <i>Alarms and Discursions</i> |
| J. H. B. Peel: | <i>Small Calendars</i> |
| E. V. Rieu (ed.): | <i>Essays by Modern Masters</i> |

INDEX

and Key to Pronunciation Symbols

It is not always possible to write in English the equivalent of the exact sounds of foreign words. You should regard the pronunciations given here as a guide which will enable you to get reasonably close to those generally considered to be correct.

a as in bat	e as in bet	o as in cot	u as in but
ā as in bate	ē as in beat	ō as in coat	ū as in mute
à as in calm	è as in her	oo as in soot	
ă as in aunt		ōō as in coo	aw as in fawn
(pronounced	i as in bit	oi as in boy	
very shortly)	ī as in bite	ow as in cow	g as in gold

an, en, in, on, un, French nasalized n.

zh, a soft sound very much like that in pleasure.

If one syllable is to be stressed more than another it is followed by ' (thus an'drō-klēs).

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